Things other people said [*see notes inside*]

"It is ironic that an event as common as suicide is one that permits little discussion in any venue due to the fiercely held opinions against it." [4]

"Our culture's taboo against suicide often keeps people who are thinking about suicide from talking about it. By talking about it, people can often get the emotional and psychological support they need to see them through a rough time. When people are afraid to talk about it, the pressures can increase to the point that they actually do something about it." [12]

"A person who commits suicide, or even talks about it, is disturbing for social conformity, implicitly suggesting suicide is an open possibility to be considered by other people as well. Talk about suicide is not welcome in our society, which in turn needs a body of 'experts', like psychiatrists, who will reassure public opinion that 'no sane human commits suicide'....Suicide is too thought-provoking for those who are unwilling to think." [18]

"The majority of people do not understand suicide and see it as an irrational act, so they use different words to describe it or just avoid the subject altogether. This keeps them from ever having to think too deeply about suicide and why it appeals to some people. It also makes suicide even more mysterious and contributes to its reputation as something awful and unspeakable." [8]

"The fact that people are incarcerated in America for thinking and talking about suicide implies that despite what the U.S. Constitution says about free speech, and despite claims Americans often make about America being a free country, many if not most Americans do not really believe in freedom of thought and speech--in addition to rejecting an individual's right to commit suicide." [15]

"Most people see the option of exiting only in the context of its effect on people who choose to do so. However, the option need not be taken in order to have a great impact. Even people who have never really given much thought to exiting, may find that the mere existence of the option enhances the experience of life, simply by providing choice, and a renewed sense of responsibility for one's own life." [6]

"You have to be your own reason to live." [anon.]

All right, *I'll* talk about it. I want to know who'll listen.

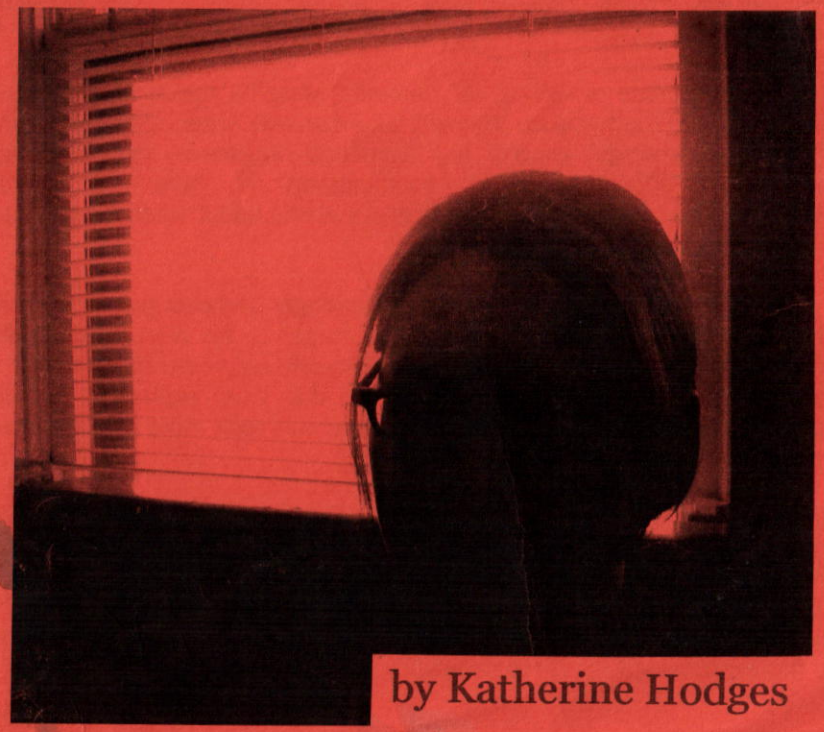
Lexy

Thinking about suicide

(not another one of those "educational" booklets)

a personal story +

unpopular views



by Katherine Hodges

This zine may be too lengthy to actually resemble those free brochures/ booklets on suicide you'd find at campus counseling centers, therapists' waiting rooms, etc., but they're what inspired me to put this together, so I'll give my original intro:

This *is* like other suicide booklets because: It says suicide is an acceptable topic to talk about, not one to ignore. It says people should feel they can ask for help. (But it may have a very different idea of what "help" constitutes.) And that it's okay to ask people if *they're* "thinking about suicide." It carries the obligatory *This is not a substitute for professional advice*. (But wants you to have some skepticism about the value of professionals.)
This *is not* like other suicide booklets because: It's not in medicinal green or blue. It's not full of ugly line drawings or smiling stock photography. It doesn't list "warning signs" or promote biological theories or urge people to seek treatment. It's one real person's story, not bits of made-up or anonymous stories. It has swearing. And sarcasm, and humor. Its message is not simply one of "prevention." Don't call it "pro-suicide," but it is *pro-choice* on suicide. Not a new philosophy, certainly, but one rarely heard or taken seriously. And this doesn't pretend to offer *solutions*–I'm just trying to open the discussion.

Profuse thanks to anyone who supported me in creating *T.a.s.*, although I didn't name anyone (or the college I did this as a fine arts project for) so no one else gets implicated in the opinions expressed here. (But they're free to mention their involvement.) Though I consider myself an "asher" (explained later), this isn't officially affiliated with the "ash subculture" or other websites or organizations. Just me.

And I'm, at the time of writing, 27, female, "white," a resident of Chicago since 1995 (after growing up in Iowa), an artist and writer, aspiring vegan, nonreligious, "average" weight, no psychiatric diagnoses, into bicycling, cooking, thrift shopping, reading, contemporary art, indie music; quite single...Oh, sorry, this isn't a personal ad–it's a zine about *when I wanted to kill myself*. My mistake!

I'll drop all sarcasm for a moment to say that I agonized over publishing and distributing this, but ultimately my desire to get these views out *slightly* outweighed my concerns about making myself so vulnerable. If you're offended by the tone and/or opinions of this zine, express it to me *respectfully*, with the understanding that I feel this took more courage than anything I've ever done.

Thinking about suicide is by Katherine Hodges, 2004. Some of it is a variation of content from my book *City of Destiny*. It's not copyrighted; you can quote/copy/distribute the material as long as you cite me. I guess you can contact me at PO Box 64509, Chicago IL 60601 *or* hoydenish@aol.com. If the response to this zine isn't too scary I might put out more issues; suicide is too complex to cover in a few dozen pages.

works cited:

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ashbusstop.org/Subculture.html
3. "ASH FAQ part 3/4: Are you for real?"
ashbusstop.org/RU4real.html
4. "ASH FAQ part 4/4: The Debate"
ashbusstop.org/std.html
5. "#alt.suicide.bus.stop"
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ashbusstop.org/enhancelife.html
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8. "Our Right to Suicide" Kristin Carr
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13. "The Tactics of Survival" C.K. Montgomery
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14. "Living and Dying The State's Way" Jeffrey A. Schaler
www.schaler.net/livinganddyingbyschalerLiberty082003.html
15. "SUICIDE: A Civil Right" Lawrence Stevens, J.D.
www.antipsychiatry.org/suicide.htm
16. "Self-Ownership or Suicide Prevention?" Thomas Szasz
www.szasz.com/freeman1.html
17. "Suicide as a Moral Issue" Thomas Szasz
www.szasz.com/iol2.html
18. "Psychiatry and Suicide - Contemporary Attitudes" taediumvitae
ashbusstop.org/psych_suicide.html
19. "45 Reasons Why Suicide May Not Be Such a Bad Idea After All" Y
ash.spaink.net/reasonsto.html

"Thinking about suicide is like eating potato chips: once you get started, you just can't stop!"*

nonfiction books:

Some of the following have been reprinted, some are out of print--I list the original publication date. I've managed to find these titles at Chicago-area libraries and/or online bookstores.

A beautifully written book, focusing on literature; he knew Sylvia Plath, also attempted suicide himself:

A. Alvarez *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (1971)

Art history and suicide--two of my favorite subjects--in one book:

Ron M. Brown *The Art of Suicide* (2002)

A huge journalistic book covering many facets of suicide, if not always from perspectives I'd agree with:

George Howe Colt *The Enigma of Suicide : A Timely Investigation into the Causes, the Possibilities for Prevention and the Paths to Healing* (1991)

An engaging study of historical attitudes towards suicide:

Henry Romilly Fedden *Suicide: A Social and Historical Study* (1938)

Fascinating stories of people who survived suicide attempts (and are glad they did):

Richard A. Heckler *Waking Up, Alive: The descent, the suicide attempt, and the return to life* (1994)

A short examination of suicide with a very literary/historical focus:

Lisa J. Lieberman *Leaving You: The Cultural Meaning of Suicide* (2003)

An excellent essay (I think he may have read it when he did a reading at my school a few years ago):

Phillip Lopate "Suicide of a Schoolteacher," in *Getting Personal: Selected Writings* (2003)

A more recent study of suicide throughout history (not much on the past century, however):

Georges Minois *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture* (2001)

Okay, I've carried *hundreds* of books around Chicago and other cities to read, and the *only* one I ever lost anywhere (a few years ago, near my previous apartment) was on *suicide*! It was this one, and I haven't replaced my copy yet. The story's even better when I point out I left it at a *bus stop*!:

Thomas Szasz *Fatal Freedom: The Ethics and Politics of Suicide* (1999)

*"...So you may as well learn all of the consequences of your thoughts." From a list on amazon.com, "So you'd like to...Learn about Suicide...A guide by Martin W. Blackwell, I have major depressive disorder, which makes me an expert."

Part I: Thinking about suicide (a personal story)

Part I tells how I developed and dealt with suicidal feelings. I sure hope I've managed to avoid self-absorption, -importance, -indulgence, or -pity, but, well, it's a long story about me. If you don't like that kind of thing, don't read it. Some of the sections are in present tense but that doesn't necessarily mean I still feel that way. Part II deals with suicide as an issue, not just my issue, and mostly makes sense without reading Part I first.

Suicide prevention pamphlets vs. real life

I got spoiled by those educational booklets and brochures and websites on suicide--and for that matter, probably any "very special" television episode or TV movie or young adult novel about it. People there dash around full of concern for people they know and look for the "warning signs" and help each other.

But in real life, at least in mine, no one acted that way. No one asked: *Are you thinking of hurting yourself? Are you hurting yourself? Are you thinking of killing yourself?*

The weeks and months passed. And my answer to each shifted from "No, not really" to a tentative or definite "Yes." And I had no idea what to say. Because I've never had a particularly good ability to communicate my problems with anyone and to ask for help. That isolation and lack of true connection brought me to that point--and once I was there, what could I do?

I couldn't really blame the people around me (though of course I secretly did) for not knowing, because in real life, people aren't close enough to me to pick up on my problems, or I unintentionally hid them well.

In fall 2003 I found a booklet called "Suicide--a cry for help" in a brochure rack at school and became a bit obsessed with it, especially the "warning signs." I've collected these mental health pamphlets and checklists for years to use in my artwork and political writing. At first I looked at those signs to see if I might seem suicidal to people even if I wasn't. If I'd talked to people about my problems *then* I'd have said *I sound so hopeless...I don't want people to think I'm suicidal!* Eventually, there was no good way to finish that sentence, and I didn't seem suicidal to people when I sort of was. I even wondered which signs I needed to show to get people's attention. I never clearly seemed--or felt--*depressed* in these months, yet I had the final symptom on most depression checklists--"thoughts of suicide."

Thinking about suicide tells I how got to that point, and how and why I went so long without saying anything, and how I finally reached out, and the odd and ultimately positive results of it all.

Sorry to spoil the surprise for you, but I didn't even attempt. Not even planning stages. Not even a "suicidal gesture." As much as I did truly feel that was the only "cry for help" I could manage--what a cliché. This story contains no hazy ambulance ride. No seeing the light in the tunnel. No fighting my way back. No grief-stricken/puzzled/angry friends and family at a bedside recovery. No *She Finally Got the Help She Needs* (*and you can too!*). No, I didn't even *try*.

I have to keep reminding myself: that's a good thing.

I've been self-conscious about a lot of strange things in my life and I have to say, fretting that I'm "not suicidal enough" to address the topic is *definitely* up there. I admit I'm not an "expert" on feeling suicidal. The worst of it was only a brief flare-up. This isn't about someone recovering from a serious, chronic wish for death. And I'm writing this with the--perhaps--naiveté and arrogance of a person who's never lost anyone close to them this way.

Another brochure I picked up at school, by a depression/manic-depression organization, says, "If you are having suicidal thoughts, it is important to recognize these thoughts for what they are: expressions of a treatable medical illness." Well, *no they're not*. This is extremely dubious science. Certainly, these thoughts can seem irrational, and could at times be influenced by organic conditions--but they aren't just symptoms like a rash or a headache. What a denial of free will. And I take it *personally*. This claim strips both my life, and my urges to escape it, of meaning. It sweeps my experiences, my emotions, my concerns under a rug of scientific neutrality. I'm not ashamed of my feelings, but I may be ashamed at what in my life led to them, and I can't hide from that.

I hate this simplistic rhetoric--the main message of most suicide prevention efforts--that suicide equals dying of the illness of depression. I dealt with self-harm and suicidal urges during the timeframe I'm describing (and still may be when you read this). I'm not arguing that these feelings and behaviors are necessarily rational--not if you believe humans have a strong instinct for self-preservation. But I do think they're the logical, utterly unsurprising result of the life I've led, and often I wonder why I didn't start to feel like this *years* ago. I want my thoughts and feelings--and the opinions expressed here--taken seriously, not brushed off as a symptom of mental illness. Not a sign that I'm just "clinically depressed" and "need treatment."

(9) recurrent thoughts of death (not just fear of dying), recurrent suicidal ideation without a specific plan, or a suicide attempt or a specific plan for committing suicide

LBN : "...the discussions that take place on a.s.h. would at least get one labeled "unstable" in real life if not hospitalized. very few people in real life are as understanding and supportive of catching the bus as you'll find here...." [1]

"Suicidal ashers are in various stages of deliberation. By open discussion, ash encourages people to evaluate their situation carefully and rationally. Some are trying to make decisions about their lives, others just like to talk with like-minded people. This is what fuels the paradox of a crowded pro-choice-suicide group, and what keeps ashers around for many years." [3]

"...There are people who are suicidal, yet still choose not to commit suicide, at least for the time being. Some are not able to eliminate their suicidal tendencies even though they have tried to do so. Others may feel that being suicidal is part of their true identity. In either case, they choose to accept that they are suicidal rather than fight it. They have the desire to die, yet they decide to live." [3]

Yes, *some people are like that*. And this is as good an ending as any. I'm sorry I don't have anything particularly inspiring or clever or brilliant to end with, but I'd like to thank you for reading this.

Oh, and don't be afraid to *ask*.

****
****

things to read:

internet:

ash: find alt.suicide.holiday wherever you access Usenet
recent and classic discussions of suicide and ethics can be found at ashbusstop.org/home.html (which also has an IRC channel and web board)
the a.s.h. web archives are at ash.spaink.net/ashnazg.html
some blogs that discuss suicide in the media, celebrity suicides, personal experiences, etc.: www.insecurities.org
www.livejournal.com/community/or_not_to_be/
a pro-choice suicide site: www.geocities.com/choosingdeath/index2.html
a fine, mostly nonmedical FAQ: www.rochford.org/suicide/inform/faq/
keep up with disability rights opposition to physician-assisted suicide: www.notdeadyet.org/
other views on antidepressants and suicide: "The Lilly Suicides: A Peculiar and Troubling Case" by Richard DeGrandpre
www.prozacspotlight.org/lilly/

I skimmed the methods and thought–how could I ever choose? They *all* sound so terrible. That FAQ could serve as a detailed appendix to Dorothy Parker's poem "You Might as Well Live." I can only read "use bag & band" so many times (and I can only read "go for decapitation" *once*–that's under "jumping in front of trains").* Reading ash forums, it seems that a lot of people are only alive because the preferred methods–barbiturates or cyanide–are so hard to obtain.

Since ash doesn't endorse formal intervention to save suicidal people, and people openly discuss methods, you can imagine the media coverage is virtually all negative.** The vilification ash has received–some articles refuse to even mention the name alt.suicide.holiday***–is *extreme*. They're regarded as maybe a notch or two above pedophiles, or white supremacists calling for race war. Even the greeting "Welcome to ash–sorry you're here" gets misinterpreted–it's not sorry you're *alive*, but sorry your life is so bad you need a forum like ash.

Although ash forums, unlike other forums for suicidal people, don't have the *goal* of preventing suicide, I think they've probably prevented, or at least delayed, more suicides than they're caused or hastened. People feel less lonely about their feelings and views.

*Also of this ilk: a book by Geo Stone on suicide methods, which I was surprised to see available at the Chicago library (I kind of wanted it for the purpose of this zine but was too paranoid to check it out); and someone did a booklet, illustrated with line drawings, on effective suicide techniques (which I saw at the zine store some time ago but felt too creeped out to purchase).

**Amazingly, *Law & Order: SVU*, a show I don't watch often, but randomly watched one night right after I first told my independent project advisor about ash, had an episode obviously inspired by articles about ash. The administrator (Marlee Matlin playing a gorgeous spokeswoman for the right to suicide) of a website/blog called "Catching the Train" (!) was charged with assisting a suicide (a syringe of insulin, for a non-diabetic woman). In real life, ashers know it's legally (and ethically) dubious to enter into suicide pacts or assist anyone. This episode managed to present a lot of pro-choice arguments, but the cops referred to people on these websites as "wackos," and their psychiatrist claimed 98% of suicides were linked to mental disorders.

***And another called it, hilariously, "Assisted Suicide Holiday," which calls for an obvious joke about a travel agency with the slogan "*Guaranteed* one-way trips–or twice your money back!"

What I thought (or didn't think) in the past

I honestly don't remember what I thought about suicide growing up. I don't think I was clearly against it--or against abortion or homosexuality--even though I grew up Catholic! I found all those things kind of strange and scary then, however.

From age 15-17 or so, when I discovered the online world and "alternative" and indie rock and wrote a zine called *Spiffy*, I was in the midst of terribly stereotypical teen angst and loneliness. But I wasn't exactly depressed, and I was never suicidal. Maybe I had those fleeting adolescent fantasies of the *They'd be sorry if I'm dead!* variety, you know, wondering who'd come to my funeral. Wanting a reaction out of people (but not being alive to enjoy the results).

One day shortly before I graduated high school I came home and my mom said "That rock musician you like is dead."* Kurt Cobain, of course. As a fan of Nirvana (I followed a then-common trajectory of getting into Nirvana then Sonic Youth then Pavement then obscure cassette-only labels and British indie-pop and experimental Japanese noise and so on) I selfishly wished he was still around to make more music. I was very disturbed he'd left a little kid behind (setting aside the issue of whether it's worse to never know a parent, or only know them as a person in tremendous emotional pain). And I didn't understand the condemnation of Cobain that seemed to say a person with fame, wealth, and talent is somehow not *allowed* to be depressed.

But I never knew anyone personally who tried or completed** suicide. In 1996 my older brother--he's adopted, I'm not--found his remaining biological family. We learned that his biological parents killed themselves (accidents or suicides--it was unclear)--*after* he was adopted. This is a sad and complicated story I can't tell here and it's the closest (possible) suicide to my family, as far as I know.***

*I'm not sure why I'm including this, except that I think of it whenever I think of Cobain's death. The next day in school, a boy I'd known since childhood at my church, normally a pretty decent guy, came into the room smirking and said "Heard the good news?" And *he* died a few years later, in a car crash I think.

**Sometimes this term is used instead of "committed" because that word sounds like suicide is a crime. This is one thing that people that are pro-choice on suicide and people that mostly think it's "mental illness" can agree on.

***You can find more about our family's story and other Native American adoptions at www.public.iastate.edu/~lhodges/0719oped.htm (my mom's *New York Times* op-ed) and www.public.iastate.edu/~lhodges/2001Jun.htm (Associated Press article about us).

In 1998-99, now an art student who'd lived in Chicago several years, I was "clinically" depressed, but never with "thoughts of suicide." I eventually sought treatment and it went marginally well--except that the first antidepressant I took made me sort of manic and I got diagnosed as "bipolar" and put on other drugs. After downing 111,502 mg of four different pills, I was off all psych drugs by mid-1999, and discovered the psychiatric consumer/survivor movement (formerly called "mental patients' liberation").

I learned to question all the tenets of the mental health establishment--its biological theories, its drugs and other physical treatments, its ever-increasing list of diagnoses, its coercive practices, its denial of individual and social responsibility in people's emotion and behavior problems. I became active in this movement, one that few people knew about, even among the left. I started a group called Mad Lib, and began to write and speak on these topics. For a long time, this helped me feel much better--I'd found a purpose, and a surprising amount of confidence. I got to know people who'd struggled with all kinds of emotional problems, including people who'd attempted suicide. I also learned a friend I knew growing up had almost planned for it. I wasn't shocked by that revelation, but in the fresh fervor of learning about these issues, I know I didn't deal with her pain as well as I could have, and I've felt sorry ever since that we haven't kept in touch more.

I haven't really been depressed since that brush with psychiatry years ago, and never considered suicide, despite the admitted emptiness of much of my life. My cheerfully arrogant self-esteem always made me think, no matter how bad it got, I still wouldn't want to deprive the world of my potential contributions.

Downhill. Fast.

Well, things changed. I thought I was finally getting out of school in 2003 with a fine arts major, but my last year there didn't go so well. A final fine arts course I needed--one I wouldn't have felt ready for anyway, since I was hardly making any art at that point--was canceled, so I chose to do an independent project. I didn't have a clear idea for a project, however, and needed to focus on finishing history classes, so I didn't do it. I "graduated"--as in, walked across the stage, my parents visiting from Iowa. But of course that summer I got letters from the school about the requirements I needed to finish to graduate. I didn't tell my parents.

"Depression and suicidal ideation can be viewed not so much as a clinical disease, as a particular world view: a depressed person has a different way of looking at things, a different system of values, from the prevalent optimistic attitude." [18]

This question and answer in early 2004 perfectly sums up the ash mix of practical concerns, grisly musings, depressive outlook, and morbid humor:

>>>Is anybody else concerned that his body will go unnoticed for many days? > >> We sort of got used to it in life....;-)

Ashers have gone after every anti-suicide argument and cliché, some of which I've covered already–religion, psychiatry, duty to yourself/the state/your family. And here are more.

To "suicide is not a solution":

"A solution is an action which when taken at a state with a problem, results to another state without that problem. So when one commits suicide he definitely solves his problems (all of them at once as a matter of fact)...If the problem is 'find happiness' then suicide is not a solution, but if it's 'stop pain' then it is. At least give us the credit of defining our own problems." [4]

To "suicide attempts are a cry for help"*:

"The problem with asking for attention by way of a suicidal gesture is that you can never be sure what kind of attention you will get." [3]

"We have no records of people simulating suicide gestures in order to get attention in earlier times–although voluntary death occurred in all ages, and official–religious and social–attitudes varied from active encouragement to fierce condemnation. Suicide attempts meant to draw attention (the 'cry for help' type) are, at least partly, a cultural phenomenon: attempting or even talking about suicide is obviously shocking in a society in which suicide is taboo." [18]

Ashers discuss how attempts may fail not only because the person is ambivalent or doing it to get attention, but because suicide is harder to carry out than people might think. And yes, this means you can find detailed information on suicide methods. The methods FAQ starts with the warning: "Some of the entries in this FAQ may be dangerous–that is, the dosages in the drugs and poisons area may be much too *small* to kill a human."

*One of the nerviest pieces *The Onion* ever published was a front-page story calling suicide a desperate "cry for death" and quoting various (phony, of course) mental health professionals who'd changed their views and decided suicidal people actually *want to die* and should be allowed to, since they're so hopeless anyway.

because it's real people with real problems, not "case studies" and "data," but I'm fascinated by this idea.

Is there an us vs. them mentality of the suicidal vs. the never-suicidal? Before I confided in my roommate, I tested his views on suicide (I knew he definitely wouldn't have a religious opposition–years ago, he was a panelist on a Phil Donahue show on teen atheists!) by mentioning recent celebrity suicides–the writer/actor Spalding Gray and singer/songwriter Elliott Smith.* He said he "couldn't imagine getting to that point" but I couldn't yet say, "Well, I can." Some people can abstractly imagine it if they someday had a painful terminal condition, but don't emotionally know what "that point" feels like.

I read nearly everything on the ash-related websites–personal expressions, rational arguments, practical advice. I'd recommend anyone approach the ash forums with some caution. At least, don't stay up till 6 a.m. one night, already in a ferociously agitated mood, knocking back gin and skimming through *all* the poetry, stories, goodbye notes, etc. on the archive site–it can be a *bit* much to take.

But if you're in a less vulnerable mood, the cynicism can be refreshing. "Y" turned a mishmash message of reasons against suicide circling the net** into the astonishing "45 Reasons Why Suicide May Not Be Such a Bad Idea After All." For example: "Anti-reason: Although my life looks worthless now, I am curious to discover its worth. Counter: Although my life looks worthless now, I would like to be spared the discovery that it is." [19]

Here's a typical psychiatric view of depression, contrasted with an asher's idea:

"During severe depression, the systems that regulate emotion become disturbed. People in severe depression often think of things that are dark and sad. Physicians refer to this as selective memory-only remembering the 'bad times' or the disappointments in life. This is a symptom of their illness, not who they are, and with proper treatment the person will start to remember good times and develop a more positive outlook." [www.dbsalliance.org/info/suicide.html]

*Other suicides during the time period covered by this zine included actor Jonathan Brandis, feminist scholar Carolyn Heilbrun (a "rational suicide"), *Chicago Sun-Times* political columnist Steve Neal, and comedian Drake Sather. Plus, all the coverage of the 10th anniversary of Kurt Cobain's death.

**I haven't seen this book, but it appears to be the list's basis: *Step Back from the Exit: 45 Reasons to Say No to Suicide*, by Jillayne Arena, 1996. And at ash.spaink.net/second.html, steward gives a scathing counter-argument to the ubiquitous "If you are thinking about suicide...read this first."

Later that summer we had a family trip to Texas for a funeral, the first I'd ever been to.* I was already starting to fall apart and pretty much postponed my breakdown until I got back to Chicago. I didn't eat for a week, and started, for the first time ever, injuring myself--that desperate resort, that flawed coping strategy of so many people who are filled with painful emotions but don't or can't express them. And are embarrassed to show anger to others--knowing how easily they get out of control--so they turn it inward as much as possible. It was minor safety-pin inflicted scars for months, then I moved up to cutting myself in late January. I wasn't very *good* at it though--and being a "cutter" who's doesn't much like blood and pain only increased my sense of failure (and in a sick way amused me too).

All of this was obviously without suicidal intent--uh, I'm not trying to bleed to death a few drops a day. I lost a *lot* of weight--30 pounds in the first 6-8 weeks after the trip, another 20 pounds in the next couple months. Because I'd been "obese" and was now moderate weight, this wouldn't register as perhaps too drastic a weight loss to anyone. I felt a bit insulted no one wondered if I had an eating disorder.

A lot of other things were going wrong. I felt more and more withdrawn, had even more trouble than usual talking to people. I avoided events I should have gone to, I barely returned people's correspondence, I wasn't seeking employment, I'd let my apartment become horribly cluttered with stuff and couldn't have anyone over (even if that'd seemed a possibility). I wasn't cooking much--a former passion. I still wasn't making any art.

But soon after the family trip I realized I wanted to write a zine about it. Then I wanted to write about how my life really seemed to be falling apart in the following weeks. Then I realized this could be the independent project I needed to graduate--to graduate from my college with a story about how my life fell apart after I *didn't* graduate. I hung around my school in fall 2003 and started to talk about the project (which eventually evolved into a book, *City of Destiny*) with teachers but for a lot of reasons it wasn't quite happening. Everything seemed stuck. I couldn't describe the project to people because describing the content would mean describing my hard to define, hard to express problems.

*The programs at the funeral said the deceased--my grandfather--had 7 grandchildren. He had 8, and so my dad, right before his own father's funeral, corrected all the programs with his fountain pen! It'd be tempting to say that "7" planted a suicidal seed in my mind then, but I don't think that's the case.

The dramatic moment

For the fifth year in a row, I went to the NARPA conference. The National Association for Rights Protection and Advocacy puts on an independent, grassroots conference for people interested in challenging the current mental health paradigm of forced treatment, drug company domination, narrow biological theories of emotional distress, and so on. I've spoken at it in the past but this would be my first time doing a workshop (on youth and psychiatry), with Leah, a friend I'd met at the 2001 conference and had seen several times a year since in psych activist situations. (There are very few younger activists in this movement and the few of us tend to travel a lot.)

It was in Austin, Texas, which topped my list of U.S. cities I've never visited but wanted to. I got to Austin around noon and had lots of time to wander the city. I'd had only a couple hours sleep and was extremely broke the first day (carrying $9 in quarters; I don't have a credit card). But as soon as I got there, from the late-November Chicago chill to sunny 70+ degrees, I kind of went *manic*. Well, the happiest I've felt since all my weird feelings started that summer. As I walked around visiting book and record and natural foods stores, I had an almost unbearable feeling of joy and excitement. I headed back to the hotel for the start of the conference. I hadn't pre-registered, and I quickly realized, unless the program was particularly compelling, I'd skip the conference (except for my friends' workshops) and wander the city all weekend instead. Austin seemed wonderful for my emotional well-being, but having to be around the activists/advocates I knew, when I'd let my activism slide for months and I was feeling terribly socially withdrawn besides, would be bad for it.

Plus, I'd rather spend my conference money on music. I'd recently gotten back into the indie-rock/pop scene after many years largely absent--barely keeping up with my favorite musicians, hardly learning about any new artists, not bothering to check out ones I'd heard of for years. One happened to be Her Space Holiday (which is mostly one guy, Marc Bianchi). I saw a display of his CDs and picked the one with the best title (it's one of the best clever/depressing titles ever): *Home is Where You Hang Yourself*. I brought, and bought, and listened to a lot of music on that trip, but I listened to this CD an unbelievable amount, especially "Famous to Me." One line got drilled into my head: "It's such a trip/that I can hide/How close I am/to suicide." I wandered Austin, or sat around the hotel, hearing it *dozens* of times.*

*Heavy metal has traditionally gotten the blame for allegedly contributing to suicide, but what about gloomy indie-pop by sad-sack guys with geeky glasses? Be careful. Odd coincidence: after I got back to Chicago, I found out that Bianchi had recently moved from San Francisco to Austin.

This project was fairly far along when I stumbled across ashbusstop.org and learned of the ash subculture–the community around alt.suicide.holiday (Usenet), #alt.suicide.bus.stop (IRC), the website and its message board, various mailing lists, a website archiving Usenet posts, etc. My personal involvement (if any) in these forums isn't important to this, but the larger role they play. Anyone sharing these values–whether or not they're depressed or suicidal–can be called an "asher."

"Ashers consider suicide to be a valid option. The mental health establishment rejects this. Note that an essential prerequisite for making a rational decision is that all reasonable options be taken into account. Therefore, from an asher's point of view, just by entering the mental health system, the asher compromises his ability to exercise a rational decision process." [2]

"In any important life decision it is possible to consult books, people or experts to help one decide. Ironically, for the most difficult decision–to be or not to be–no assistance is possible." [3]

"Although some people may agree in theory to a person's right to suicide, they are unwilling to address the individual's right to a reliable means of death." [4]

Ashers disagree with both religious (many are atheist/agnostic) and psychiatric views of suicide–at the very least, they're against forced treatment for "harm to oneself," and are more skeptical of psychiatry than most people. (Though I wish so many people in the forums didn't identify so much with the psychiatric labels they've been given.)

I thought I'd found all the subcultures, especially controversial ones, I'd be interested in, but here's another. There seems to be no limit on the number of obscure or marginalized or unpopular causes (psych survivors, sex workers' rights, unschooling/radical homeschooling, polyamory, fat acceptance) and political/ethical orientations (vegan, anarchist, atheist) I'm interested in. This one seems difficult to bring up no matter how radical or open-minded people are, because anyone may have lost someone close to them to suicide. I don't even know how accepting the psychiatric survivor movement as a whole would be of ash–both oppose coercive treatment, but some psych survivors are fairly religious and might not endorse suicide as a choice.

And is being (or having been) suicidal another *identity* for me now, another thing, like being a cutter, to be "out" about? It makes perfect sense to have a safe space like ash for people to discuss suicidal feelings; yet it's strange to think of forming a shared identity around the wish to die. I don't want to encourage people to *study* ash,

But, having said that, it's important to note that *some* suicides are by people that really aren't connected to anyone. And some are by people whose families have abused and terrorized the suicidal person so thoroughly that it's hard to imagine they'd care. And some are by people who have hurt people terribly. (Whenever I hear of a murder-suicide, I wish the person had skipped right to the suicide–a lot of children, ex-lovers and spouses, coworkers, classmates, etc. would be spared.)

Most situations aren't that extreme. And yes, suicide can be regarded as selfish–though sometimes it's the first "selfish" act of someone who's been selfless their entire life.* But isn't it also selfish to want a person in pain to stay alive to make *you* happy? Many Americans now accept that you shouldn't have to have a certain career or religion or get married or have kids to make your parents, or society, happy. There's obviously no easy solution to this; it's weighing *one* person's pain of living against the pain their death could cause *many* people.**

The ASH subculture

"The ash subculture has different values than the rest of society. Society attributes the highest value to human life. In contrast, we think that the value of individual freedom is superior to the value of life, when it does not physically interfere with another's freedom. This includes the individual freedom to take one's own life if desired. Note that we value life as well, we only disagree with society on the 'order' of importance of these values. ...We believe that people have a right to commit suicide and thus, in general, do not try to dissuade people from doing so. This attitude combined with other content which appears on the group may cause some to believe that we are promoting suicide, but what we are promoting is merely the right to choose to commit suicide." [1]

"'Catching the bus' is a euphemism for suicide. The bus stop is a place to hang out while waiting for a bus, trying to decide whether to catch one, or just for the company of other bus stop regulars." [5]

*I got that argument at ash.spaink.net/recourse.html.

**I haven't addressed the messy circumstances of a person–say a parent with young children–with people dependent on them. Also, I'm only giving arguments against *completed* suicide–a legitimate argument against *attempting* suicide is ending up still alive but in far worse condition.

I met up with Leah and two activists from Massachusetts, Vikki and Oryx, the first evening. They didn't exclude me in any way, but it felt like a clique I was left out of. Late that night we went out to observe the (brutally loud and obnoxious) Austin nightlife and I couldn't stand it, couldn't stand even a minute in a sports bar. They only stayed at one a few minutes, but by then I'd wandered off without saying goodbye, walked around listening to music for a while, went back to the hotel room to keep listening, and injure myself a little. I didn't see them much Friday, but went to Vikki and Oryx's workshop Saturday.

I'd e-mailed Leah that I wanted to talk about some problems I was having, and she did mention it to me at some point, but the conversation never seemed to be happening. In an incredibly stupid move, I spent Saturday night with Leah, Vikki, and another young activist I'd just met. I liked all of them but spending hours with them, feeling frozen because I hadn't gotten to confide in anyone yet and just couldn't force cheerfulness, was unbearable. I thought they could see how awful I felt, how much I hated myself then. I learned later that they thought I was withdrawn because I hated *them*.

It was such a mess. Leah and I did our workshop Sunday morning and it went okay, but when the four of us from the night before hung out, getting ready to leave, things were tense, and I quit talking. Didn't talk to Leah and Vikki in the cab to the airport, didn't end up saying goodbye to them once we were there, even when I saw them in the adjacent waiting area. I was hit with this overwhelming feeling: *I give up*. I didn't know what I meant by that--it wasn't suicidal.

Due to some seat mix-ups I had my own row on the plane, the exit row in fact, although this time I didn't get the obligatory talk to see if I could help people out in an emergency. Good, I wouldn't say anything dreadful, maudlin, like *Well, I think I still have it in me to save* other *people*.

I'm not sure when precisely it happened. The sleep deprivation and misery should have sent me into intense crying fits, or for variety, a panic attack--haven't had one of those in ages. But the feelings got misdirected somehow, turned inside, bottling up and exploding in my chest, and--and somewhere over the glittering lights of Texas, at age 27, I felt genuinely suicidal for the first time in my life.

Maybe it was all that staring at the big word "EXIT." I wasn't *actively* suicidal, I wouldn't "commit" anything there even if I'd wanted to, which I didn't, because I thought of stuff to take care of at home, not to mention I didn't want to seem like I'm enacting some pathetic revenge. But it was a qualitative change in my emotions. To paraphrase from a book I'd read weeks later, in *The Savage God*, A. Alvarez tells of randomly saying to himself for years, "I wish I was dead," and suddenly one day realizing he

applications, with my lack of formal experience, even though I'm more than skilled enough for most jobs I could apply to. I'm such a financial burden on my parents and it's embarrassing if anyone else finds that out.

It's too late to establish real connections to people. My family is wonderful but we've never been able to talk about anything personal. I keep so much from them. I've never, out loud, said "I love you" to anyone in my family, and this makes me feel incompetent at best, evil at worst. I haven't had a *truly* close, real-and-in-person friend in 20 years--and I'm *in* my 20s. My closet friends are/were either people I've known online/ occasionally saw in person, or people I was currently dating, or someone with someone *else* as a best friend.

And I haven't dated in years--*literally, years*. I could give the fairly respectable explanation that I've been focusing on other accomplishments. Except--*where exactly are they*? All those websites and zines and painting series I've promised, or the beautifully fixed-up and decorated apartment, suitable for parties and performances? And despite recent self-esteem-boosting changes in my appearance, *nothing* has resulted (except a lot of compliments from faculty). The good news: at least it's not that everyone was shallow and only ignoring me because I was fat. The bad news: something must be *deeply* wrong with me. It's just nicer wrapping for a package no one wants, I suppose. I don't have a clue how to start trying to date again. The self-injury is like a painfully literal way to *write myself off*--hey, no one's going to see me anyway, what difference does it make? All those years-ago relationships either just fizzled out or I got dumped. I don't know if any relationship I've been in has been "love." If I have to wonder, I guess they weren't.

I can only deal with this absence of intimacy through snide comments, like *I don't have a sexual orientation--it was revoked from lack of use*. Or explain my situation as getting mysteriously put into one of those awful experiments they used to do (on animals, at least) to see how long a being could go without touch and affection. It'd seem, a *long* time--and when do the white-coated researchers show up to give me my big compensation for this experiment, anyway?

I could go on and on listing these things that make me *not want to go on anymore*. I'm fearful that either there's something terribly wrong with me I'm unaware of, and that's why no one gets close, or *worse*, I don't make the effort to get close to people or care about doing so, and *that's* what's terribly wrong with me. I *know* many people have trouble getting close to others--what scares me is that I'm not sure I even care enough to try. Really, it all makes me feel like some sort of sociopath, if a non-violent, non-threatening one.

I'm despondent enough to use a sports metaphor: I've been reluctantly permitted to be on the team, but I'm on the bench. I'm afraid I'll be put in and screw things up. But I don't want a pep talk. *Please don't* tell

I disagree with the theory that teenagers' brains function differently from adults–you know, all those clichés about "impulsivity" and "risk-taking." I think it's just that younger people have less experience dealing with whatever crises and disappointments they face. Suicide is oft-cited as the third leading cause of death for 15-22 year olds (or similar statistics). That tends to grab attention, but it's so high because so few youth die from more "adult" causes like heart attacks, strokes, or AIDS. The *rate* is lower than among adults generally, and much lower than among the elderly.*

Okay. At the risk of losing my (non-existent) punk credibility here, I have to take issue with Take Action, an annual tour and ongoing project by the Sub City record label and other sponsors. Sub City Records' Take Action! Tour benefits The National Hopeline Network (1-800-SUICIDE, www.hopeline.com). Their website (www.takeactiontour.com) describes the hotline as "24 hour, confidential attentive help for people in a crisis highlighted by and often leading to suicide, depression, drug abuse, domestic abuse, etc." I don't have a problem with a crisis line, or with putting out a benefit CD of punk/emo bands called *Too Young to Die*. Who could criticize a teen suicide prevention campaign? It's just the sort of Protect-the-Children venture that's, annoyingly, beyond debate (like, say Megan's Law).

Well, my problem is that ultimately, this fundraising gives money to an organization that promotes a relentlessly medicalized view of emotional suffering. The National Hopeline Network's major message–it's on the side of a *fucking semi truck* they drive around!–is "The #1 Cause of Suicide is Untreated Depression." But people under 18 can't legally consent to their "treatment." And the risks of violence associated with SSRI antidepressants, the most-used kind, are much worse in youth. Some young people have depression that seems to arrive out of nowhere with no logical explanation (though I think there's always one) and they can certainly consult professionals if they want. But many youth also need help to get away from abusive situations. To know that it's okay to be gay or have different religious beliefs from their parents. To know they can survive their first heartbreak. To know it's fine to be the first in their family to go to college–or the first to *not* go. They don't just need "treatment."

*See the important books *The Scapegoat Generation: America's War on Adolescents* and *Framing Youth: 10 myths about the Next Generation*, by Mike A. Males, for an intelligent look at the "epidemic" of teen suicide, as well as other myths about youth beloved by commentators across the political spectrum.

Some of the websites have crisis e-mail services and/or have crisis hotlines to call. I wonder what would have happened if I'd contacted one during the worst of my feelings, not for a psych referral, but for assistance in broaching my problems to people around me. (I thought of calling one just for research purposes for this booklet, but didn't.) Psychiatry doesn't have a good record of suicide prevention, but to be fair, crisis lines haven't had much effect on the rate either. It's the ambivalent ones who tend to call, not those who are extremely serious and determined in their decision. But at least hotlines don't carry the financial and personal costs of psychiatric treatments–hospitalization, restraints, drugs, electroshock. They do give desperate people someone to talk to. I'm honestly not sure how often those desperate people risk getting referred for treatment, but a person who absolutely doesn't want intervention probably isn't going to call.

Teenagers

"...I went home, promising myself that when I go I'm going to do it correctly. Seeing [my grandfather] like that, it was just an eye-opener. I brainstormed some methods on a sheet of paper, and then I went on the Internet and did some research. I found out that I should be displaying certain telltale behaviors, like giving away my treasured belongings, doing poorly in school, and telling people that the world would be better off without me. So I resolved to do all that, and then I spent the rest of the day doing homework and finishing my paper on *Huck Finn*." –Stella, 17-year-old narrator of *Like the Red Panda*, a 2004 novel by Andrea Seigel

Still obsessed with suicide warning signs, I typed those three words into Google and Yahoo searches and looked at the top 100 results for each. I don't have any profound insights from that exhausting experiment, except that teenagers get *so much of the fucking attention* in suicide prevention that I felt a bit left out.

Not that I'm indifferent to young people's problems, not at all. Teen suicide can be seen as a reflection of so many failures in society–and no, I don't mean that society is failing to hustle enough kids into psych treatment, it seems willing enough to do *that*. It's a society that often fails to give them *hope*. Teens have to deal with the oppressions that so many face in this country–racism, sexism, abuse, anti-gay violence, poverty, etc.–and the specific vulnerabilities of youth. And suicide *is* more tragic among younger people, who don't even stay around to see if they can handle adult life, with its mix of increased freedoms and spirit-crushing routines and ennui.

me I can be a good player if I try. *Let me off the team now.* I'll just slip out unnoticed before I get the chance to play and ruin it for everyone. Because I can see it happening.

Another metaphor: strangely, considering how opposed I am to governments using this tactic, it appears I wanted to launch a *pre-emptive strike* against *myself*. It's not so much that I'm in chronic, unbearable emotional pain--most of the time I'm *not*--but that I sense this endless pain is *on its way*. If my life in five years would be remotely as unfulfilling as I feel it is today, well, then, I should get out soon.

So I'm stuck with endless images of past loneliness and invisibility and awkwardness and failure. And I can't see my future at all. At all, despite what I just said in the above paragraph. I can't see myself having a relationship, having a job, having a life that goes a single day beyond whenever the hell it is I finally finish school. If I can't even imagine the future how can I possibly live it?

I'm careening between all these time periods at once. It doesn't make much sense. Past, present, future collide in weird ways and they all seem so *empty*.

But then, to make it even stranger, sometimes I think: I've had a good run, and that makes it okay to leave. I've told people my life peaked at 17-19, the years I did my zine, and through online and Chicago connections, ended up deep in the zine and indie-rock scene, getting to meet/interview/hang out with most of my favorite bands of the time. (Warning: We're now at the name-dropping and self-aggrandizement section.) My zine had readers around the U.S. and the world, got some great reviews, got me a feature in *Scholastic Update* (you know, those free magazines you'd get in school?). The co-founder of Matador Records was a close (online, but I saw him in person a bunch of times) friend to me as a troubled teen. My mom made dinner for Pavement, who I met several times; I was in a Sebadoh video shown on MTV (made from their tour video footage; this also happened to be the first night I ever got drunk--what a story); Thurston from Sonic Youth bought my zine at my friend's record store and wrote me a postcard about it. And so on.

I had some success after that, especially by starting Mad Lib. I've been on an international BBC radio program, a guest on a cable-access disability rights show, profiled in the *Chicago Reader*, featured in *Punk Planet*. I've had big articles on psychiatric oppression published, been one of the keynote speakers at a major psych consumer/survivor conference, spoken at rallies, co-presented at packed workshops at activist conferences.

And I've had adventure. I've been trapped in an elevator, I've been hit by a car (knocked off my bike), I've been evicted, I've been in jail (nabbed just for being at a protest, two days in New York City jails, three court visits until the charges were dropped). I've wandered around quite a

few major cities on too little sleep, money, and food. I've even walked through Canada's most dangerous neighborhood by myself at night (the really druggy part of Vancouver).

In 7th grade I was in what was supposedly the longest spelling bee in Iowa history, facing off against the previous year's winner who ended up going to the national one again (but it was still exciting). I had a handmade jewelry business in high school. Over my college years, I've made a variety of art that's been well-received. I've been in plenty of exhibitions, all related to my school in some way. I've sold paintings. I've gotten lots of recognition for my vegan cooking, which I've brought to all kinds of events.

I want to stay around long enough to record the things I've done. But don't know if I can endure the intense fear that it's too late to make new memories.

It gets a bit worse, or at least it doesn't get much better

I desperately needed to talk about what went wrong in Austin--but now I had the additional burden of feeling like I wanted to kill myself, which made talking about things *just a little harder.*

One evening I was so stuck in misery that the only thing that could take my mind off wanting to die was sleep, so I took a nap around 7 p.m. The only thing I could bear being *awake* for would be talking to Leah on the phone, and I couldn't find her number. And then she called! We briefly addressed what happened but it was mostly a call about an upcoming conference. The next morning I sent her a long, pathetic e-mail about how bad I felt about Austin and how depressed I was that no one seemed to connect with me beyond whatever they needed from me (a project, article, workshop). I called her a few days later before I read her response--good, as it turned out she'd expressed some anger at me about Austin. And--I can barely exaggerate the shame I felt about this--she didn't even think (in the two years I've known her!) that I'd been trying to be friends with her. But with that phone call we started to communicate again, and I erased her harsh e-mail without ever reading it.

One afternoon in December I meant to go into school for something but could barely move. I spent nearly three hours, first curled up on the futon, then the carpet, listening to gloomy music and stuck in grim thoughts. One was: *why do I have to know about that easily accessible 10th floor fire escape at school? I wish I didn't know that.* Because I knew it'd become a recurring image, even if I wouldn't act on it.

And as I lay on the carpet I pulled self-help depression books off the bottom bookshelf and learned how I should have a support system of five people I can call if I'm feeling suicidal. That's just the kind of sensible, hopeful advice that throws me into the deepest despair. Uh, yeah: If I felt I

What stake does the government–here I'm only dealing with U.S. laws and customs–have in preventing suicide?, I'll ask, rhetorically. (Besides wanting people to stay around and keep paying taxes.) It sure isn't a statement on the innate "value of life," not when there's a death penalty, and numerous deaths at the hands of police and in prisons and psych facilities, and the "war on terrorism"...I could go on and on. Suicide is framed as a public health problem, and I don't think it's wrong to *study* suicide on a societal level, to see how it relates to various factors. I just don't want the results used for coercive prevention, and I think the government should get out of the suicide prevention business. (And it's definitely a *business*.)

Suicide should be regarded as an individual decision. Since it's often a tragic decision, it makes sense on an individual level to want to prevent it, and urge suicidal people to try hotlines, support groups, therapy, medications, etc. Choosing suicide is an ultimate freedom we all have–though of course exercising that freedom prevents one from ever getting to enjoy any other freedoms. As with other issues involving the body–abortion or drug use–you may disagree with the choice yourself, but that can't justify coercive prevention of others' choices.

Prevention

I searched "suicide prevention" on the internet, and pretty quickly found the oft-linked piece, "if you are thinking about suicide...read this first." For this kind of material, it's not bad, and has some decent related essays. There's one about taking suicidal people seriously–for instance, not saying their "problems don't add up to suicide." And another makes the intriguing, if somewhat labored, argument that suicidal feelings *themselves* are a type of post-traumatic stress disorder.*

And predictably I found many websites with a strong "treat depression" message. I've wondered, but haven't yet researched, if these suicide prevention organizations and websites, like most mental health advocacy groups (NAMI [National Alliance for the Mentally Ill], DBSA [Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance], CHADD [Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder], etc.), and professional organizations (American Psychiatric Association, etc.), get funding from the pharmaceutical industry.

*See www.metanoia.org/suicide/. But they want you to consult a "trained mental health professional," and a page links to conventional depression resources.

their fears of assisted suicide's ramifications for disabled people are well-founded, given the history of eugenics and disability oppression in the U.S. and elsewhere. Here are some perspectives of people with disabilities against assisted suicide:

"...Why aren't we better at the long-term and palliative care that might make PAD [physician assisted death] less attractive? Why do we 'respect' the suicidal wishes of disabled people, yet treat the same wishes of nondisabled people as cries for help? Why would we make trusted doctors speed our passage to eternity? Why do so many people want PAD only because they're afraid of becoming like us?" [10]

"On December 3, 1997, the Hemlock Society issued a widely ignored press release in which its Executive Director, Faye Girsh, called for laws allowing family members and other 'agents' to procure court orders to kill 'a demented parent, a suffering severely disable [sic] spouse, or a child' if their lives are 'too burdensome to continue.'" [9]

"Assisted suicide has been marketed to the American public as a step toward increasing individual freedom, but choice is an empty slogan in a world full of pressures on people with chronic illnesses and disabilities. Now is not the time to establish a public policy securing the profits of a health care system that abandons those most in need and would bury the evidence of their crime." [9]

"At a time when many people believe that the only arguments against the legalization of assisted suicide involve limiting freedoms and limiting rights, it is critical that these people be exposed to an analysis and an argument that makes it clear that our freedoms and our rights and our very lives are in jeopardy if assisted suicide is legalized." [13]

Government, "public health," and freedom

"The greatest human right is the right of self-ownership, one aspect of which is the right to life, but another aspect of which is the right to end one's own life. Whether or not a person supports the right to commit suicide is a litmus test of whether or not that person truly believes in self-ownership and the individual freedom that comes with it..." [15]

"The government realizes that the choice between life and death is the one aspect of people's lives that it cannot directly control through legislation, so it has had to resort to a more subtle method of control in the case of suicide. Advancing the disease concept of suicide has been extremely effective in achieving this goal." [8]

had five people I'm that close to, I wouldn't be IN this mess. What, I'm just supposed to call people and drop that on them? Which five fucking people do I call up and say, *Hey, I know I haven't talked to you in a while, but guess what? I don't want to live anymore! I fucking wish I was dead. Are you free tomorrow? Let's talk!*

I muddled through December. My project went nowhere because it turned out my teachers weren't even getting my e-mails (I was accidentally in their killfile or something--that's funny to me *now*) and I wasn't setting up meetings and so on. These were mostly technical difficulties, but it all felt like personal failure. And every little setback added up.

Then it was time for Christmas with the family in Iowa. It's a popular myth that suicide increases around the winter holidays.* A myth, but *I* felt despondent. But I didn't want to inconvenience my family by letting on to my annoying wish for death. It was the first Christmas in four years that my brother, who lives in Phoenix, would be joining us. And my mother had an end-of-December deadline to revise the index of a new edition of her language/travel guide to Ukraine. All bad timing for my feelings. As if it's ever the right time.

My parents were so concerned with me by this point--that is, concerned I wasn't working--that at the beginning of my visit we went for a "mediation" session. Not family therapy, exactly, but two hours of my parents and I and the mediator sitting around discussing why I wasn't working and what could be done about that. I figured I owed them this, since I felt like such an awful burden on them. Unfortunately I didn't bother to say I *hadn't technically graduated.* And after the mediator said our discussion would be confidential unless it concerned anyone hurting themselves or others, I figured I'd better stay quiet about both the self-injury and suicidal thoughts. The whole session hardly addressed the problems I had beyond just job and money stuff--and my parents *knew* going in that I had more problems. I can't talk to people, I can't see my future much farther than being pulled off a ledge somewhere, etc. But I've never been any good at discussing personal things with them, or with my brother, and it wouldn't start here. I left the session feeling worse. I told my mom that the next evening, but we couldn't talk then. I felt more and more bottled up. We couldn't talk until the day before I left, and it was a start, but I kept in the major things I should have said. I didn't want to ruin the holidays.

*This was the origin of the infamous alt.suicide.holiday newsgroup, discussed later.

And I muddled through early January. Midmonth something odd happened, after yet another evening spent at bookstores browsing books on suicide. Late that Saturday night I showed up at the 24-hour Walgreen's I frequent*, as intent as I'd ever been on some sort of self-destructive *gesture* (not an *attempt*). I wondered where the nearest hospital was--but didn't get around to asking--then started browsing the over-the-counter pills. Needless to say, nothing on the packages** can let you know what's *just enough to take to send you to the hospital, but with no chance of death; just enough to make people notice, but not mock you for your pitiful "cry for help"; just enough for people to see your pain, but not get you put under the long-term control of the psychiatric system.* No, no matter what, you'd have to get your stomach pumped or drink a charcoal smoothie and doesn't that sound hellish? Why not stop this silly obsession, and go destroy your brain cells a normal, slow way, say with magazines: what's the latest celebrity diet trend? Have fucking Ben and fucking Jennifer fucking broken the fuck up yet or what?

Okay, I didn't consciously think *all* that then, but I did find myself quickly moving away from the pills, transfixed by a canister of "Thicken Up," which makes pureed food the desired consistency: "Honey-like. Nectar-like. Pudding." And a "special collector's edition" of *Oxygen* magazine called *Glutes*. And so on. And then the late-night security guard I see on so many of these visits smiles at me this time. And I drift over to the nearby 24-hour restaurant and the owner, Jimmy, smiles at me and gives me *two* Hershey's Kisses when I leave. They'd be frightened to know how much it all means to me then.

Apparently consumption--of products I don't need, and food that's not so good for me--is enough to pull me out of quasi-suicidal despair? Fine, just don't tell it to *Adbusters*.

*I didn't think about this on that visit but it's a curious, morbid bit of trivia: of the seven Chicago-area deaths in 1982 from cyanide-laced Tylenol, the one Chicago victim bought her pills at this particular store. Some creep got away with mass murder; meanwhile, to obtain cyanide for an effective suicide takes some doing, *so I've heard*. But you already knew life isn't fair.

**Also not thought about on that visit, but something I've noticed because I *obviously don't have enough serious things to do with my time*: Some OTC pill warning labels say "In case of overdose" and some say "In case of accidental overdose." Are the latter ones pretending that no one OD's on purpose, or just saying if you do, *screw you, you don't deserve our advice?*

Overdose warning: Taking more than the recommended dose (overdose) could cause serious health problems. In case of overdose, get medical help or contact a Poison Control Center right away. Quick medical attention is critical for adults as well as for children even if you do not notice any signs or symptoms.

Physician-assisted suicide

I can't give this complicated issue the space it deserves here, except to quote people who've also noticed society's double standard of support for physician-*assisted* suicide (for illness, physical pain and disability) and physician-*prevented* suicide (for all other cases, like emotional pain and dissatisfaction with life).

"It is now fashionable to clamor for 'assisted suicide,' sometimes described as 'the right to die' or 'death with dignity.' But curiously the right to suicide–to kill oneself without harassment or hindrance from the state–is not at all popular...The same people who want the state, through the agency of authorized physicians, to be able to kill people also want the state, through the agency of authorized physicians, to be able to stop people from killing themselves. Their position is thus consistent: individuals do not have any right to kill themselves, whereas the government has every right to kill individuals, if, for example, the government considers that the individual's life is now too painful or too harrowing. Your body does not belong to you: it belongs to the government." [14]

"...Just as able-bodied suicidal people are incarcerated for their own supposed benefit (to prevent them from committing suicide) when the real reason is selfish concerns of others, people with severe, permanent disability or incurable disease are allowed to die for their own supposed benefit when a real but unacknowledged purpose is to relieve others ('society') of the burden of caring for them." [15]

The power of medical paternalism is one valid concern. And the disability rights movement raises others–how arguments for physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia often assume that disabled peoples' lives are less valuable. Although I believe suicide can be a rational choice, I dislike the concept of "rational suicide" as it's usually explained–a person thinks when they get to x age or x level of illness or disability, they'll choose to die. This reasoning can rely on negative views of age and disability, and often has a rather distasteful economic component too–if you cost too much, might as well exit. Suicide should be an individual decision, not something *expected* of people who've become a "burden."

Disability activists have many different views of suicide as such; some accept the idea that it's often caused by (biologically-based) depression. They argue that suicide itself is not illegal, so disabled and ill people who really want to kill themselves can do so without the help (or coercion) of doctors. I think these arguments can be a bit naïve about the legality and ease of committing suicide. But

"We are proud that suicide is no longer a crime, yet it is plainly not legal; if it were, it would be illegal to use force to prevent suicide and it would be legal to help a person kill himself. Instead, coercive suicide prevention is considered a life-saving treatment and helping a person kill himself is (in most jurisdictions) a felony." [17]

Psychiatrists can be quick to use coercion because failing to prevent a patient's suicide can get them sued by survivors. But if they didn't pretend they had the capacity to prevent suicide, this litigation issue could go away.

"Psychiatrists often speak about the stigma of depression and suicide, simultaneously proposing repressive solutions...Psychiatry precisely re-stigmatizes suicide in the name of science, with much the same practices as religion did in the name of God." [18]

"Another regrettable consequence of the medicalization of suicide is that suicidal persons whose therapy or hospitalization is not helpful can tend to think that nothing can help any further in improving their lives, feeling discouraged to look for non-medical alternatives: which seems logical, since psychiatry is thought to be the supreme authority in dealing with suicidal tendencies...Very little can be done to know scientifically--except in a rough probabilistic way--if one's mental state will get better or worse: a lot depends on one's desire to improve their own situation." [18]

"Considering the harmfulness of today's biological 'treatments' in psychiatry, the dreariness and sometimes cruelty of institutional life, and the effects of psychiatric stigma, such as lowered self-esteem and discrimination in education and employment, increased rates of suicide among suicidal people who get psychiatric 'treatment' compared with a similar population of suicidal people who do not get 'treatment' should be expected. The value of recognizing the right to commit suicide is not only respecting individual freedom but preventing the harm and cruelty that often go on in the name of suicide prevention." [15]

48 Niagara Falls, N.Y. late Nov. 2001 interesting juxtaposition...

I think you'll see why I haven't named my school here

Two days later, I went to school, deciding to sit in on most of the fine arts critiques that last week of the semester. Since I wasn't taking classes or producing much tangible art, I didn't think I could sign up for one. But I wanted to see what other people were doing--both the ones I knew from the arts group I was part of, and students I hadn't met yet.

I also showed up that Monday morning with very fierce urges to damage myself. I wouldn't say this school is any less safe than others, but people can be careless. Specifically, I could swear that several times during the semester, next to the art classroom sinks, I'd seen X-Acto knives and loose razor blades. Any chance I got that week I'd go into an unattended classroom and search. I wasn't entirely sure what I'd do if I found something--it wouldn't be a suicide attempt, of course, but it would be an escalation of self-injury, though I didn't know if I'd necessarily do it *at school.* Monday, quite randomly, there was a giant wastebasket of sawdust in the hall. A teacher said it was particleboard. It looked unsafe, but in a long-term, hazardous-to-your-lungs way. I wanted something for *now*, but didn't find anything all week.

I wandered into the room with the fire escape and checked out the view. Actually, I checked out the "view" in many locations on that floor throughout the week. I'd even glance towards the window when I sat in the room where the crits took place--eventually, I sat across the room so I couldn't anymore. And that Monday, during the lunch break, I was somewhere on the Magnificent Mile, visiting a shopping center I don't get to often. I looked a bit at the stores I like there, but I also looked at the "view" (an unobstructed one) from the top floor. It's not that high, a person probably wouldn't die there--it's hard to say what would happen. I walked back to school and couldn't help myself--I stared ominously at the Chicago River when I crossed the bridge.

I came back, dropped in on crits again, wandered around to windows again, and for lack of anything better to do, found myself in a supply room, and for lack of better weapons, attempted to scar myself with the big silver pushpins the school uses to hang up work in the classrooms and display cases. They didn't work as well as safety pins, but I put a few in my pocket and bag, for later.

Even on a good day I barely know how to give anyone feedback on their artwork. And on a day I'm beset with horrible images of (and urges to) my death--well, forget it. It was an excellent excuse for my silence, but not one I could tell anyone. I felt horrifically guilty all week, as if my whole presence there was a lie. It was not the first or the last time I'd have this strange feeling that it's "wrong" for me to be out in public, apparently okay, when inside I feel awful. I apologized at the end of the week to one teacher

for sitting there quietly all week being "creepy" (all I could say, really) and he just thanked me for being there.

As Monday ended, one of my former teachers, who I hadn't really talked to all semester, said hello and I clumsily explained trying to do a project and he said he could meet with me the next morning to figure out what I could do. Exactly what I needed; our discussion the next day was one reason--but not the only one--that the most intense of these urges went away. (He wasn't around the next semester so I didn't see him for many weeks and then I thanked him for being there are the right time, said I'd been feeling "despondent" then. Not letting on to the whole truth, of course. I wondered if he'd be alarmed if he knew.)

But I did enjoy sitting in on critiques that week. I even brought cookies I'd made and occasionally made a comment about art and talked to many students.* I talked to the teacher who'd be advising me on my project--we'd start over, next semester. And the teacher who was coordinating the graduating senior fine arts show, to see if I'd still be in it. And the art department chair, who'd be approving my grade change once I did the long-delayed project, so I could finally graduate. Everything started to fall into place. And I tried not to focus on how I hadn't let on to my problems to anyone all week. Or tried to get an appointment (not being a regular enrolled student, I'd need some assistance to get one) at the counseling center.

Jumping, and other cheerful topics.

That Saturday I had a dreadful phone chat with my mother (my fault, since I *still* hadn't said I didn't graduate). The worst feelings had faded but I'll admit I went to another shopping center and looked at the "view" there too. That one could be fatal if you could manage it but really--*I wouldn't jump at a mall!* I wouldn't even write a *fictional character* jumping at a mall! What kind of freaking obvious statement would that be?

*One student there once had, as an end-of-semester project in a class we had together, come to school with bandaged wrists to see if anyone would notice. The teacher liked it; so did I, except I was ashamed I hadn't noticed, and told her that Monday, months after. Another student, later in the week, had a photo series of herself in semi-formal dresses, lying down in various spots in a nicely furnished home. People read her poses as a passed-out party girl, or a murder victim; I was the only one who said "or putting on her best dress and committing suicide." I genuinely thought you could interpret the photos that way, but I was also making a little in-joke, I guess.

staff, to forced drugging and ECT, seclusion and restraint, and physical or sexual assault from other patients or staff.

What real effect does all this polypharmacy and electroshock and hospitalization and forced treatment have on suicide rates? Even if it "works," can it be justified? Isn't it fair to ask how all this can contribute to suicide, if people are damaged from the physical treatments, or miserable over what they endured, or afraid of having to go back to the hospital and go through more of it, or hopeless that their treatment didn't work? Some suicidal people will bypass the mental health system *entirely* for fear of going through such treatment.

Mainstream psychiatric thought, in addition to calling suicidal thoughts "expressions of a treatable medical illness," offers this gem: "The person may express anger and feel betrayal by your attempt to prevent their suicide or get them into treatment. Be strong. Realize that these reactions are caused by the illness and should pass once the person has received the proper treatment."* Resistance isn't just futile–it's an *illness*.

"The person's feelings are no longer his or her own, but instead are construed as symptoms of the disease. Once suicide is considered a disease, doctors can begin treating the person with or without consent." [8]

"It is in the name of public health and 'acting in the patient's best interests' that the greatest deprivations of personal freedom occur. These include involuntary commitment to mental hospitals or enforced therapy sessions, being forced to take medication, and constant surveillance from family, friends, and doctors." [8]

"'Suicide prevention'–a euphemism for incarceration in a mental hospital–is preventive detention, par excellence. From a civil rights viewpoint, depriving a person of liberty because he might commit an act in the future is anathema. Doing so because he might commit an act that is not a crime is an outrageous injustice." [16]

"While attempting suicide may not be an actual crime, it is treated as if it were: people who talk about or attempt suicide are likely to end up in a jail called a mental hospital. Whether one is behind bars in a mental hospital or behind bars in a prison, one is deprived of liberty by the state." [14]

*Both quotes are from the "Suicide Prevention" page of the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance website (www.dbsalliance.org/info/suicide.html)

**These take on the medical model; many are hard to find, but most can be ordered at www.MindFreedom.org: Mary Boyle: *Schizophrenia: A Scientific Delusion* (2002); Peter R. Breggin MD: *Toxic Psychiatry* (1991); *Talking Back to Ritalin* (2001); *The Anti-Depressant Fact Book* (2001); Peter R. Breggin MD & David Cohen PhD: *Your Drug May Be Your Problem: How and Why to Stop Taking Psychiatric Medications* (1999); Ty Colbert PhD: *Broken Brains or Wounded Hearts* (1996); *Blaming Our Genes* (2001); Richard DeGrandpre PhD: *Ritalin Nation: Rapid-Fire Culture and the Transformation of Human Consciousness* (2000); Joseph Glenmullen MD: *Prozac Backlash* (2001); Richard Gosden PhD: *Punishing the Patient: How Psychiatrists Misunderstand and Mistreat Schizophrenia* (2001); Lucy Johnstone: *Users and Abusers of Psychiatry* (2000); Jay Joseph: *The Gene Illusion: Genetic Research in Psychiatry and Psychology Under the Microscope* (2003); Bruce Levine PhD: *Commonsense Rebellion: Debunking Psychiatry, Confronting Society* (2001); John Modrow: *How To Become A Schizophrenic: The Case Against Biological Psychiatry* (1996); Elliot Valenstein PhD: *Blaming the Brain: The Truth About Drugs and Mental Health* (1998); Robert Whitaker: *Mad In America: Bad Science, Bad Medicine, and the Enduring Mistreatment of the Mentally Ill* (2002)

And the treatments? It's important to note that all psychiatric drugs work by in some sense *damaging* the brain, not "correcting" anything. This doesn't mean it's *wrong* to take them–many people experience them as helpful. (But I'd recommend the lowest possible doses of the fewest number of meds for short periods of time, not the terrifying current psychiatric practice of loading people up on multiple drugs for years or life.) But it's important to know there are risks of dependency, and often the bad consequence of a person being "off their meds" is really a *withdrawal* effect. And of course the drugs can have negative effects; unfortunately, if those are mood/behavior changes, the person might get put on drugs for *those* symptoms. The popular SSRI antidepressants (Prozac, Zoloft, Paxil, etc.) have been linked to suicidal and homicidal violence in people who had *no* history of those feelings before starting the drugs.

ECT (electro-convulsive therapy, but I prefer "electroshock") is touted as effective for suicidal depression and "safer" than drugs for elderly or pregnant patients. Mental health professionals love to go on and on about how "improved" modern ECT is over the bad old days, because anesthetic is used now. But frankly the change is mostly *aesthetic*–no more broken bones from convulsions. Because of anesthesia, *higher* doses of electricity are used, resulting in more possible memory loss. It can be permanent–and it's not just a loss of past memory, but harm to one's future memory ability.

Psychiatric institutions can have their own miseries, ranging from the boredom of institutional life and patronizing attitudes from

I swear, none of this was intended as "research" or "rehearsal." I don't want to be a jumper. I mean, really. All the excitement and worry over my weight the past months, all the new clothes--I wouldn't want to throw it all away by doing *that*. I'm much too vain. Put tactlessly: *I'm still working on the good-looking corpse.* I didn't give much serious thought to a method, but I know I'd want a less gruesome one if possible.

And I don't want anyone to think I'd ever actually kill myself *at a school.* Students who kill themselves on their college campus probably just do it there because it's convenient; I don't know if, in their despair, they understand it could be interpreted as an aggressive act against their school. By January 2004 there had been three on-campus (presumed) suicides, all jumping, at New York University that school year; the first two were at the school's library. (A fourth student jumped, off-campus, in March.)

A tangential rant here--I read comments by the friends of one of the NYU students.* His death wasn't clearly a suicide, maybe an accident--and it's not the "truth" that concerns me, but the tone they took to say it wasn't suicide: "...the most kind hearted and smartest person we've known. He would never think about committing suicide and I don't think it's fair to come to all these conclusions about him..." "...THIS WAS NOT A SUICIDE. As a good friend of...there was absolutely NO reason to think it was pre-meditated...was not mentally-ill or suicidal. He was genuinely happy, good-hearted, sweet, charming, intelligent, easy-going, incredibly funny...He had a loving, supportive community here (he was everybody's favorite), as well as back home." "We all knew him here as the most caring, friendly, upbeat person on our floor--certainly not someone who was suicidal."

Hey, *great* job breaking down the stigma around suicide! By implication, am I *un*friendly, *un*caring, and *un*intelligent? (Or am I just too sensitive [well, yeah, always, I know])? They make contemplating suicide seem on par with, oh, hitting on 12-year-old girls. Let's hope you never have to use this, but I'll give you permission to say: "She was *exactly* the type to consider suicide. Sometimes she even sounded like she'd do it just to prove a point! Sometimes we even wanted to say, *just do it already, then!*" (Not that you should ever actually say that to anyone...)

I think I can explain my nagging obsession with public places and jumping. First, I'd been fascinated with the NYU deaths and the public response. I confess to wondering if there've been any student suicides associated with my school--in all my years there, I can't recall one. Not at the school or off-campus, though statistically, there must have been *some.* (Please don't think it's a contest to be the first one, okay?)

*At www.nyuview.citycynic.com/index.php?m=20031013

Second, I think maybe just living in a big city and being depressed or anxious in this way can make a person notice what's around. Chicago has so many options. A lake, a river with several branches, el stations, Metra stations, and of course, tall buildings. Or go to the "wrong" neighborhood, for a slight chance someone else will do it for them. But I hardly ever hear about suicides in the local news.* Is it some form of censorship, or is it that suicides are regarded as private the way cancer or AIDS deaths are, not public like car crashes or homicide? I only hear about suicide if it's a well-known or very young person, or it's a murder-suicide.** It's strange that I can't recall a single story I've heard of anyone jumping to their death in Chicago. It's also strange I'd care one way or the other. Actually, once in a while I'll hear of an el or Metra delay due to a person jumping. It's awful, because it's grisly, and inadvertently involves someone else in the suicide, and how lousy would it be to possibly have one's last thoughts be about ruining the morning commute for everybody? Feeling like an inconvenience in life, and in death, too.

Third, and this is *more than a little* humiliating, a lifetime of usually feeling invisible can manifest itself some very strange ways. As in, if I'm thinking about suicide, I'd want to go out as publicly as possible. I'm terrified to die in obscurity (people I haven't seen in a while would ask about me six months later and be surprised by the news) so I should just pick a way that everyone will find out about quickly. It's all to send some final message--pay attention to me!--without getting to experience that attention. In this state of hopelessness, I can barely think about getting attention or fame in a healthy way.

And I didn't tell anyone because--

Before I get to the part where I tell, you wonder: why *didn't* I tell for so long? It's a strange mix of feeling *not serious enough* about suicidal urges and *too serious* about them.

*"How journalism has changed. There was a time when it was assumed that a suicide is EXACTLY the kind of news story that the public wants to read about. Among other things, it's a ready-made mystery story." [7]

**Or a "suicide bombing," which aside from being a dreadful tactic, gives suicide a terrible image. Isn't it really *homicide* using an unconventional weapon? Loved this, from *The Onion*, April 29 2004 (headline only, no story): "Suicide Bombing A Cry For Help, Vengeance Against The Infidel"

risks being dismissed as an act of intellectual know-nothingness, akin to asserting that cancer has nothing to do with illness or medicine." [17]

"Psychiatric discourse indeed assumes free will to be an organ, which can malfunction like the heart or the kidneys. Such metaphors might be questioned, however, by any intelligent being. The analogy between mental and physical diseases is, in this respect, a convenient moral expedient: when you assume an act (like suicide) to be wrong, but are not sure why and how to condemn it, it is easy to state that it 'happens' without being chosen." [18]

Even if psychiatric theories were correct, is prevention effective? Increased psychiatric treatment hasn't decreased the *rate* of suicide–despite rhetoric about people "not getting the treatment they need," many who committed suicide *were* in treatment.

Depending on who you ask, something like 50-90% or more of suicides are linked to depression, with the rest due to bipolar illness, schizophrenia, alcoholism, and other causes. I personally feel a bit left out of this knee-jerk "suicidal thoughts = symptom of depression" equation. When I was depressed years ago, I wasn't suicidal; when I felt suicidal, I wasn't depressed. My issue is anxiety, or, at times, "social phobia."* Regardless, my fear of ever being written off as another case of "untreated mental illness" if I did actually commit suicide strengthens my will to live–a form of suicide prevention I'm sure the psychiatrists never intended.

But far more important than my personal resentment, the theory of depression and suicide as caused by inadequate serotonin levels just isn't proven. *Correlation is not the same as causation*, and many studies that show different brain chemistry or structure in the mentally ill are done on people who've already been on brain-changing psychiatric drugs. Biological theories in psychiatry, whether they concern genetics or chemical imbalances or brain structure, tend to fall apart under serious scrutiny–even the "best" proof, studies of identical twins, are amazingly dubious. I'll refer you to the many fine, thoroughly researched journal articles and books that take on this widely accepted form of biological determinism, that "psychiatric drugs correct chemical imbalances." (Here we witness the power of putting things in medical language–that's how so many "progressive" people who reject biological theories concerning gender, race, intelligence, class, etc., accept the biological model of mental illness.)

*Being far more anxious than depressed is why, I think, I'm able to write this at all, or at least why it hasn't all come out in some gloomy livejournal-type "I hate myself" tone.

murder the self. And murder is a crime against the soul." (Antonella Gambotto, author of *The Eclipse: A Memoir of Suicide*) "Suicide is a big spiritual no-no. You don't take life, and suicide is taking a life. People who commit suicide just don't understand that they have to come back and live through every lesson again, if in a different form. So it's double the grief and for what? Temporary relief from suffering. Remember one thing: suffering is God's grace. No matter how bad things get, remember that." ("Renowned clairvoyant" Alan Leslie Pilkington) "The soul feels guilt, pain, and anguish for a life cut short. He learns of his destiny and how beneficial and meaningful his life would have been if he had stayed alive....I can say all of those who have come back have warned others not to repeat their mistakes. The suicide act slowed their spiritual progress, and they had a very difficult time forgiving themselves." (*Talking to Heaven*, James Van Praagh)

**According to religion, it's "unnatural," but to biological psychiatry, isn't it in a sense, "natural"? Hmmmm.

***A marvelous version of this argument is "The Parable of the Jelly Donut" by Hermotimus Boukephalos (ashbusstop.org/Donut.html) That website takes on other religious objections too.

The mental health system

"We should not realistically expect psychiatrists to officially say suicide is not a disease: if they did so, ordinary people wouldn't know what exactly suicide is. They would remain with a mental vacuum–since society is largely unprepared to address the possibility of suicide as a responsible decision. It's perhaps the time to fill this vacuum." [18]

When scientific theories trumped religious explanations, "Successful suiciders ceased to be referred to as a species of assassins, becoming a class of victims." [18] And society found different ways to condemn and control suicide.

"When society classifies suicide as a mental-health problem, it obviously doesn't mean: 'a person may be mentally ill and, contemplating his mental illness from a detached standpoint, decide to stop it by suicide rather than by therapy'. Rather, it means that the desire to commit suicide is itself sick, is the sign that the mental illness is particularly critical." [18]

"For the person who kills himself or plans to kill himself, suicide is, eo ipso, an action. Psychiatrists, however, maintain that suicide is a happening, the result of a disease: as coronary arteriosclerosis causes myocardial infarction, so clinical depression causes suicide. Set against this mind set, the view that, a priori, suicide has nothing to do with illness or medicine, which is my view,

First: no one noticed anything. What happens on TV, and in books I've read, even in *nonfiction* books, where people sense something's wrong, people pick up vibes--doesn't appear to work in real life. I thought I seemed empty, withdrawn, stricken, hopeless. For a change of pace at times, I'd turn my anger outward, from *I'm beyond help so who cares if they notice or not* to *Is everyone stupid or what for not noticing?* Doesn't something seem wrong? Don't I seem like a different person? Or is my normal demeanor so "shy" or "quiet" that it doesn't even register? And I'm so not-close to people that no one will ask. I almost never looked people in the eyes in the past and I don't do it now. I can't resent people for not reading my mind.

Should I be flattered that no one thinks I'm messed up? So many people would love to be able to conceal their despair, so many go to such lengths to hide their feelings. I seem to achieve it effortlessly. And I hate it.

Second: which people that I know could I tell? As noted, I'm not close enough to my parents, or used to telling my brother personal things. I could probably get comfortable enough with most friends/acquaintances that I could end up telling them--but how would I start? I have so little experience with helping others that I feel *guilty* asking for help for myself. My roommate (a longtime friend) had to know eventually, but I didn't say anything then. His longtime unemployment really strained things. It felt like having to rely on him for emotional support would be like his "payment" to me, and that felt wrong.

And telling the faculty, particularly the ones I was supposed to consult with about my project? I'm not kidding with this one--it's the sort of thing a person who's been in art school for an eternity thinks: *I don't want to be a cliché.* I mean, didn't being a suicidal artist--or writer--go out *decades* ago? I wonder if I'd rather completely destroy myself than be thought unoriginal. (Therefore, ending up clichéd and *dead.*)

I practiced telling, over and over, in my head. I knew how to explain it. I'm SO not a weepy "I hate myself and want to die" type of person. I'm more a, "I've, uh, had this problem with, uh" (Meaningful glance. At my shoes.) "not wanting to be alive anymore, and, uh, visualizing what I could do about that, *not that I'm actually planning to* do *anything, don't send me to the counselors!*"

In general, suicide is an issue that people don't feel they can handle if they're not "professionals"--but they may not understand why some suicidal people first and foremost want to *avoid* professionals.

Third: It's *too serious.* Thinking about suicide (and knowing I don't truly want to die right now) is when I *most* want to consult a "professional," not necessarily because they have any particular wisdom, but because I figure they've heard this before and won't be too scared. But then I had to wonder--even if I'm not planning anything, is "suicidal ideation" (or self-

injury) enough to get me into trouble--that is, involuntary treatment of some kind? This is a legitimate concern for me, especially having a bit of a psychiatric history, and it made me too--well, I hate to say *paranoid*--to bring it up during the mediation session, or to try to get counseling appointments at school. I don't know why it never occurred to me to call crisis hotlines as a safe place to discuss these feelings--they supposedly won't report callers unless there appears to be imminent danger.

Fourth: It's *not serious enough.* I wasn't planning to do anything, right? I wasn't in crisis or constant pain. Why waste anyone's time with my pathetic problems? If I did talk, would anyone understand why I'm so upset? I knew I probably wouldn't get a religious lecture from anyone I know, on "Life is a Precious Gift From God." But I was *terrified* of getting a lecture on *how good I have it.* I'd feel so much guiltier. I *know* I'm absurdly fucking privileged, okay? Don't make me feel worse by making me think I'm *not allowed* to hate myself and long to escape the mess (I think) I've made of things. One of the best things suicide prevention experts--or anyone who knows anything about suicidal feelings, period--say is *not to judge* other people's reasons for feeling suicidal. Be careful about telling them what they have to live for, with trying to force optimism. Because *you are not them and don't know what they're feeling.* Of *course* I have plenty to live for. But at that time it paled next to my extreme failure at connecting to people in any meaningful way. Suicidal feelings don't arrive out of an absolute measure of pain and oppression, but from one's reality compared to one's expectations--such as *my* expectation that I should perhaps be close to other human beings.

So I finally told, and...

I went TWO MONTHS without letting anyone know about my "suicidal ideation." (Confession: about 5-6 weeks in, I decided *Might as well make it two months for a nice round figure.*) And then I had my big opportunity. This story is how several people who've dealt with significant emotional pain ended up hurting each terribly. It's not funny. But within a few weeks of it I was already looking back and laughing because it's *just so completely bizarre*, one of the strangest stories of my entire life.

There's a major annual conference for radical activists on all sorts of issues, the National Conference on Organized Resistance, held so far every January at American University in Washington D.C. I went for the first time in 2003, when Leah, Vikki, Oryx, and I presented a workshop called "Fighting Corporate Psychiatry." I think ours was the first psychiatric consumer/survivor movement workshop they'd had. We were in a room that comfortably held 40 people, and about 120 showed up--it was quite a success, and we were all eager to present in 2004. This year we

And then, as this zine was well underway, I learned about ash. It's a community that developed out of the alt.suicide.holiday Usenet group that originated in the late 1980s as a safe, non-judgmental space for people to discuss their own suicidal feelings–with others who consider suicide a valid choice. And share advice on how to actually do it, for people who make that choice. These are the people actually putting "pro-choice" suicide beliefs into practice. I could not *believe* I've had these views on suicide for *five years* before becoming aware of ash–but then, I hadn't really been doing online searches about suicide until recently (and despite being online since 1992, I ended up someone who was very late to learn about or check out blogs, livejournal, Friendster, etc.). I'll explore the ash subculture more later; many of the quotes to follow are from ash forums.

Religion

I've been an atheist my entire adult life, so religious objections to suicide don't even enter my mind.* The typical American mindset now is the worst of both worlds–people are generally convinced suicide results from mental illness, but also frequently regard it as a sin.** Religion has been used through history to justify anything, no matter how absurd or brutal. And it's a tragic irony that religion (cults, and in some times and places, the dominant religion) has caused many dubious suicides–people who martyred themselves to be with their god(s), or get to heaven faster, or just to join their departed loved ones. Yet the fear that suicides land in hell has kept countless others tethered to unbearable lives they may have wished to escape. Obviously religious arguments are deeply held beliefs for many people, but I'd prefer to use my space here to focus on mental health dogma. So I'll just give one pithy response, to the objection that "Life is a gift from God":

"If life is a gift then I should be allowed to do whatever I want with it once it's mine, this includes throwing the gift away." [4]***

*If you're rusty on what they are, a little web searching will fix that. From "The Right to Life" section of "The New Wanderings of Dave & Susan" (www.geocities.com/dwwsmw57/RTL-suicide.html): "The act of suicide is unnatural and selfish. Those who commit suicide do so in an attempt to escape sufferings they view to be insurmountable. They are, simply, not thinking clearly....Life is a gift from God. It is nothing but good. To kill yourself is to go against the idea of natural law; 'Good is to be done and evil avoided.' Life=good, suicide=evil." (Now *there's* a bumper sticker!)
And from a new-agey website (www.thisisawar.com/Home.htm), not much better: "...In attempting suicide, a person is attempting to cold-bloodedly

and psychiatric views of it. But through my personal investment in learning about the topic, my views crystallized.

Here's a belief firmly rooted in fact: *Suicide prevention doesn't work*. Has anyone else *noticed* this? Yes, *individual* suicides get prevented in various (sometimes harmful) ways, but on the societal level, the rates haven't substantially changed. (And as you may know, doctors have a higher rate than the general public, and psychiatrists have a higher rate than other doctors.) It should be *obvious* that the mental health establishment, with its biological, corporate, and coercive biases, utterly fails at explaining *or* preventing suicide. Of course, the mainstream/corporate media will never fundamentally question the system; they'll just find more "experts" to talk about "serotonin levels" and hospitalization "for the patient's own good" and ECT as an "effective treatment" and "preventable tragedies" and so on. And it's always a concern of "public health," never an issue of *individual choice*. (I'll explain this in the following sections.)

During these months of my suicidal feelings and my *writing* about those feelings, I became very, very obsessed with reading about suicide (that in itself is considered a warning sign). I did tremendous amounts of internet research, also described later. I read or skimmed the few books on suicide I already owned. I had countless stops in bookstores to search the death/dying/grief sections, see what books on depression said about suicide (surprisingly, some barely cover the topic), look for memoirs and novels and short stories and "confessional" poetry that mentioned suicide. I replaced a long-missing library card (last seen as I headed to the airport for the Austin trip) and immediately checked out a stack of books on suicide (and self-injury, the other obsession during these months).

I gained impressive knowledge of which actors, writers, artists, musicians, etc. had committed or attempted or considered suicide. I read tabloids and celebrity magazines for some of this knowledge, shamelessly searching it out even for celebrities I don't care about (although technically that's almost all of them). A major book on suicide, by one widely read biologically-oriented psychiatrist, who purportedly aims to strip suicide of any romantic image it may have,* does a lousy job of it by pumping the book full of suicide notes and poetry and cleverly staged death scenes of famous and non-famous people. Wow, thanks for all the inspiration.

*And when the book answered my question–that people who jump from bridges into water almost always die from the *impact*, not drowning–well, *that* de-romanticizes things.

had a bigger room, double workshop slot, and would be joined by Alex Asch, who recently got an early release from a Mormon-run psychiatric boot camp (!).* And NCOR paid for my plane ticket this year!

I'd sent Leah, Oryx and Vikki an e-mail explaining and apologizing for my lousy behavior in Austin and making it clear I had some problems. Vikki and I would stay at Leah's apartment again this year and I had nice phone chats with Leah beforehand. I was in a reasonably good mood before the trip, though I had a nasty situation with my roommate that wouldn't get discussed for a while. I'd talked to faculty about my independent project, now back on track. And I had artwork in a show (and in the window on a street corner in downtown Chicago!) for the first time in ages--an installation of digital photos I'd taken since July, since all this weirdness started.

The Friday I arrived in D.C., I wanted to talk, but it just didn't happen, and I went to bed feeling down. All day Saturday I mingled at the conference, promoting our workshop to people I did and didn't know. That night we didn't really have plans. It was just the three of us at the apartment, hanging out. I knew I couldn't do the workshop the next day if I didn't have a chance to talk about my problems. Otherwise--what? I'd be too nervous to present, or I'd decide to reveal things while on the panel (I'm not *that* dramatic). We, um, used some substances. Okay. This story isn't a joke, but I'll admit my timing and delivery were way off that night.

The timing--the night before our first-thing-in-the-morning workshop. The delivery--well, my excitement at getting to talk, and the substances, made me not just talk and talk, but talk with a truly odd level of cheerfulness given the topics at hand. It nearly all came up: problems with school, parents, and working; shyness, withdrawal, anxiety; weight loss and going without eating; self-injury, suicidal urges. I talked about my "failure" at cutting myself, and the suspicious ways I checked out tall buildings, in the *same tone* I talked about having a crush on someone!

Here's how I finally brought up the suicidal thoughts. I believe it's a classic example of *what not to say*. I'd made it clear (I thought) that the Austin mess was almost all my fault…so I didn't think they'd take this the wrong way, but still. I'll paraphrase: "The first time I ever felt suicidal was just after I saw you in Austin." Oops.

But they seemed to take it all well. I knew both of them had past personal issues around self-injury and suicide. So I trusted them as people that wouldn't be too freaked out. And they were so supportive. It was one of the best conversations of my life.

*It's an amazing story. He got picked up and shipped off by the authorities while at a session at the Institute for Social Ecology, an anarchist institute in Vermont, thereby becoming a *teenage anarchist political prisoner*.

They went to bed, and unburdened and exhilarated, I went to the only place I could have a light on--the bathroom--and read *When the Messenger is Hot.** After some time, Leah inquired after me, nervously. Later I realized she thought I was in there cutting myself--no, I wouldn't do that at someone else's home, what kind of guest would that make me?

So I went to bed happy and woke up with nothing but routine pre-public speaking anxiety. Oryx came over and we all sat around in the living room. People looked nervous so I joked, "What is this, an intervention?" "Kind of."

They'd talked to each other. They were worried about me. Because of their own issues they were uncomfortable with me. So they didn't want me to present at the workshop and one of them *didn't even want me in the audience.* Also, I had to find somewhere else to stay that night. Did they think I was in crisis? I knew I wasn't--but the day's events absolutely threw me into one.

Vikki and Leah left for the workshop, leaving me with Oryx, as if he had to babysit me. I resented that, but we ended up having a great discussion, both about what had just happened (he didn't think I should have been kicked out) and what I'd talked about last night. We left for NCOR--I still wanted to see the rest of the conference--and got there about halfway through our workshop. Oryx went in, thinking he'd just watch, but I peeked in and saw *he got on the panel.* I wasn't mad at him--he'd traveled a ways to be here, too--but I was angry that he got invited up and I wasn't even allowed *in the room.* I also wondered what excuse they'd given for my absence. I didn't want people to think I was hungover or slept late or was unprepared; I didn't want them to lie about a "family emergency."

In the halls I saw some people I knew and wished desperately I could tell about this ludicrous situation right as it was happening. But I didn't. I'd have to let on why they were so freaked out, and wouldn't that frighten everyone else, too? And what would they think of us--a workshop on the importance of peer support and alternatives to psychiatry, and some of the panelists *kicked their co-presenter out for their alleged emotional problems.* The irony. More accurately, the *hypocrisy.*

I had lunch with Oryx and we bonded more--I'd known him a few years but never had an intimate conversation before. Leah and Vikki showed up as we finished and we left--they didn't say anything to me. Oryx had to leave for home, so we said a fond farewell, and I was utterly alone.

*Hey, why not drag *another* Chicago author (Elizabeth Crane, who I've also met) into one of my depressing stories? I love that book (short stories) too.

Part II: Thinking about suicide (political and philosophical views)

"Contemplating suicide is little less than a thought-crime. The assumption is that thinking seriously about death and suicide is incompatible with an acceptable or normal life. It would follow that talking and thinking freely about suicide is a dangerous thing." [18]

"Perhaps the time is ripe to rethink our attitude toward suicide and its relation to the medical profession, accept suicide comfortably, and speak about it calmly. To accomplish this, we must demedicalize and destigmatize voluntary death and accept it as a behavior that has always been and will always be a part of the human condition. Wanting to die or killing oneself is sometimes blameworthy, sometimes praiseworthy, and sometimes neither; it is not a disease; it cannot be a bona fide medical treatment; and it can never justify deprivation of liberty." [17]

"To say that the moment of suicide is a supremely spiritual point in a man's life–perhaps the most important one–is to give the lie to all the platitudes spoken at funerals and the tut-tutting of onlookers afterwards. To see the suicide as pathetic, as most people do, is to fail to confront the idea that he may have reached a moment in time in which his mind, far from being clouded, was more clear than it had ever been." [7]

A few notes on Part II: I've decided to quote a great deal of material instead of trying to put it all in my own words and end up feeling like I'm plagiarizing; consult the "Works Cited" list to learn who said what. I did plenty of non-internet research but for some reason preferred to only quote internet writing. Many of these pieces use the male pronoun, to my annoyance. Rather than clumsily altering it, I'll let it stand–maybe it's just an acknowledgment that the majority of completed suicides are by males. So it's like discussions of self-injurers or rape survivors that use the female pronoun.

Since learning of the psychiatric consumer/survivor movement in 1999, I've had clear opinions on suicide. I've been convinced that coercive suicide prevention is wrong, and suicide is far too complex to be explained by brain chemistry or other biological theories. I also learned of the disability rights opposition to physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia. My views are pretty much the *opposite* of the mainstream view that may accept physician-assisted suicide, but rejects suicide as such. However, I had less a clear *defense* of suicide as a right than opposition to traditional religious

senior show artwork from them and the faculty…See, it's the bright side of suicidal despair--all this led to wonderful things.

But what did I learn? *After* I first made the photo booklet, I thought, if *this* doesn't force the question, "Are you thinking about suicide?" nothing will.

As it turns out, nothing will.

By now I fear my response to such a question. I mean, it could be a wild display of enthusiasm and relief that would catch the person asking off guard. Perhaps I'd hug them, and shout, "You've just said the phrase that pays!" and promise to bake them a layer cake. They deserve a prize for forthrightness. But no one will ask. Anyone willing to break this silence--*so* entrenched in our culture--should get showered with confetti and surrounded by ringing bells, as if they're the millionth customer somewhere. But they only have to be the *first*. The first at something a little bit harder. I should admit my own damn hypocrisy at this point--how likely am *I* to ask that question of anyone else?

I didn't make *Our failure to communicate* as a way to test people's response to the subject of suicide, but it ended up as an experiment. More than any artwork I've done, this was a piece where the reaction to the work was the major aspect of the work (this is an art theory concept I seem to not be explaining very well). It was about *my* failure to communicate but became about *theirs*. I pushed myself up to and beyond my limits of expressing my emotions to others--what this entire story is about--and at some point I wanted other people to push beyond *their* limits of what they're comfortable asking about. Not that I expect the arts faculty to be *therapists* or anything. I feel a little like a test case--what should they do when a student makes work on something so volatile and possibly personal? At least my situation ended well--there was no tragedy that would make the school overreact in the future because they underreacted in the past. I'll admit *Oftc* was an unusual piece, because it was both humorous--I really had a lot of fun with it--and a reflection of the painful fact that *for two months I didn't tell anyone I felt like killing myself.*

But if I'm *consciously* testing anyone with any of this, it's not with my behaviors or emotions but my beliefs. That suicidal thoughts and self-injury are not themselves the problem (though they are a problem) but signs of the *real* problem--my difficulties relating to other people. They aren't symptoms I felt I needed professional treatment for, needing to be medicated away, but manifestations of deeper problems in my life. It's not that I'd want to suffer with these signs indefinitely; but I do see them as having value.

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I checked back at our "Fight Corporate Psychiatry" literature table a while later. It was gone, all gone except for bags of my stuff with a note from Leah on top. They'd left the conference, apparently not even trusting me to sit at our literature table and talk to people, and not wanting to risk running into me. I was even more alone.

Needless to say, all this is of course *excellent* behavior if a person is actually suicidal.

Now things were even worse and I even more desperately needed to talk. I saw more people I was acquainted with but again, how could I explain all this? I found Kate, the organizer who'd been in touch with me about my travel plans, and found out I could stay at her place that night--I didn't say much about why I had to move. She drove me home when NCOR ended and went back to finish things up. I was as alone as I could get.

But eventually I reached Leah on the phone to say "Look, I'm not okay with what happened…" She said "I can't talk now." I knew she had plans that night, but then she said, "I can't work with you anymore."

What? *What?* I simply can't exaggerate the shock and horror that remark, on top of everything else, induced. The night before, she'd said if I ever felt that badly I could call her at 2:30 a.m. if I needed to. Now I couldn't talk to her *at all*? I'd never known such an abrupt turnaround in my life. At least when I saw a psychiatrist, she didn't offer me care and respect and then *take it all back the next day*. What was the lesson to all this? I'd had a *lifetime* of barely confiding in people. Now I'd confided, and I got punished for it. The people I'd most trusted to confide in ended up rejecting me in the most painful way I'd ever experienced.

It was excruciating. I couldn't see pacing the apartment all evening, so I walked a few blocks to Whole Foods and got coffee and sat around crying over it. I think that was the fifth time I'd cried that day. That might seem bad, but it was probably as much as I'd cried in the previous *six months* and it was very cathartic. I felt I *had* to injure, in the restroom there--I wouldn't do it at Kate's either.

My theory was right, however. Just telling people seemed enough to dissipate the suicidal thoughts. They'd never been that *serious* anyway, but this made them lift. Nothing that awful day made me reconsider. Although I briefly thought about how I'd been born in D.C. and it could be interesting if I died there too…

Nature decided I hadn't been insulted enough yet, and there was a huge snowfall well underway by the time I left the store. The streets confused me this time and it took almost an hour of wandering through the snow to walk those few blocks back. I had dinner and Kate showed up. We chatted about cooking and then I told her the story of what happened that day--but I was vague about the self-harm issues. She was a conference

organizer so I thought she should know about someone getting excluded from their own workshop.

The next day I had to pick up the rest of my things from the lobby of Leah's building, and get to the airport, everything delayed from snow. I talked a little with my roommate--I told him *something weird happened*--and we decided I could get home on my own this time. I feared that I could have a reoccurrence of the Austin return trip, but it didn't happen. I guess they didn't think about how their rejection could have pushed me that way again--not that they would ultimately have been responsible for my actions, of course. At the airports and on the plane I was just too shocked and angry, too certain that I'd been wronged, too certain the only thing I'd done wrong was pick a bad time to talk about things, to hate myself. That feeling continued for weeks--in a way, I was almost *thankful* to be lifted a bit out of self-loathing.

Leah eventually apologized. (And turned out to have been profoundly affected by the pain she caused me, and made positive changes in her life.) The personal hurt of this situation can be resolved, but they can't make up for the professional loss. I looked forward to that workshop for an entire year! But instead I have to say "I went to a conference, got kicked out of my own workshop for mistakenly being thought suicidal, and *all I got was this lousy t-shirt*!"* Really.

Why I never got to any planning stages

I won't take up space with general arguments against suicide. You can find those *anywhere*. I agree with some of them**--up to a point. Here I'll stick to why it's definitely not something *I* wish to do now, maybe not ever, but who knows? I'm being genuine with all this--it's not a ruse to throw the mental health system off my trail.

All right, then. Someone having to go through my all my possessions (however much stuff you might imagine I have, multiply that figure by 10, at least) is the worst horror I could personally inflict on anyone. Oh, and some people might be sad I'm gone. That was my *second* thought. That one's always my *second* thought.

*I borrowed money from the donations jar on our lit table and got a very nice NCOR t-shirt. The table was gone before I could tell them I'd borrowed the money. I like the shirt but it's hard to wear it without wanting to tell this whole story. Unrelated, but to resolve a previous remark I made--the weekend of NCOR, Ben and Jennifer did in fact *break the fuck up*.

**Pretty much just the one about suicide as an irreversible decision (things could get better) and the one about the pain it causes family and friends. See Part II.

20th), and this all would result in a counseling appointment, which I'd wanted (despite my hesitation) anyway.

[Tuesday 5/4] I met with David, who I hadn't talked to in a while, about my installation for the senior show. I had to bring up how strange I felt about the past few weeks, though I could tell he didn't want to talk about it much.

[Wednesday 5/5] I spent my whole first counseling session (it was short anyway, because I was running late, and also had to fill out checklists of my "feelings," "thoughts," etc., deciding at this point I could leave the suicide-related ones blank) describing the previous few weeks and the strange year that started it all, mentioning the self-injury at the end. I started to install my piece, affixing brochure racks to the wall, then leveling and nailing up 32 4"x6" photos (and that was only half the photos in the piece!). In the afternoon I checked in with Lisa, feeling substantially better. After the arts group meeting I had a long talk with Susan; she agreed things could have been handled differently. I said I wish I'd talked to her about all this much sooner--even though I've known her longer than any of the other faculty I've mentioned, I hadn't said much about my book project to her.

[Thursday 5/6] Lee got back from his trip Tuesday but I didn't catch him until now, on my way to finish installing my photos. I didn't use the silly line I'd thought of ("So, am I off orange alert around here now?") but I asked if things were okay now, and said the last few weeks had been weird. He said "We love you and want you to succeed" or something like that. A check-in was all I needed then, I could have a talk later.

[Friday 5/7] Saw Tim at school, things seemed smoothed over, and it was less awkward than when I ran into him on Wednesday.

[Monday 5/10] I gave a signed copy of the color booklet to Lee (Lisa got one already; it felt like my first book signing!) and knew he couldn't talk then so I just said I'll finish *this* booklet, I shouldn't worry about it, I've got nothing to lose here anymore…

[And the days after] I already said things were resolved so I don't need to get much more specific. By now the senior show had opened (with our critiques, and the reception, at the end of May) but this booklet wasn't in it yet; I was fighting off a cold and it's hard to stay up all night writing about suicide even on a good day. In my counseling appointment 5/12, I gave the startling (to me) news that after cutting myself nearly every day for months, I'd gone about a week without really doing it. It's not any one person; it could be having a critical mass of people who now knew about it and were "concerned" for me. AND, and as of 5/11, when my independent project grade officially registered--a grade for *this* booklet in progress, among other writing and photography--*I have actually fucking graduated from college*, and got the real diploma 5/14. And I appear to be getting better and better at talking to other students, and I heard a lot of nice things about my

I knew Susan, David, and Lisa had *all* talked to Lee before he left. I'd been handed off to a professional; no one could just *ask* me. Maybe students who hadn't known me long wouldn't confront me, but I wish that faculty who'd known me a while could--I didn't want to think my problems were so shameful or disgusting that people couldn't talk to me directly. All this felt like an overreaction, but maybe the faculty I'd first shown the piece to had underreacted. I'd been glad they weren't freaked out, didn't take it literally. But when confronted with a piece like that it'd be fine to just ask, "Are you okay?" and what motivated the piece (a fair question for *any* artwork, right?).

I ran into Tim, and mentioned the e-mail, which he hadn't seen yet.

[Friday 4/30] I dropped off my plans for my senior show installation. I'd talked to both student curators by phone about "last-minute content issues." They knew I meant the "Cry for help" booklet, but I didn't really describe *this* booklet or say that my self-injury was also what set this off (I said this in a later e-mail). They were pretty casual and supportive about the whole thing. A senior show is nerve-wracking enough without also having to reassure the school that you're not in a suicidal crisis.

[Saturday-Sunday 5/1-5/2] May Day weekend I went to a crowded concert and even more crowded party, totally withdrawn at both, desperately wanting to talk to someone--a fellow student, or anyone I knew from activist or artist contexts--about this mess, and if I should include *this* booklet in the show or not. I couldn't believe that for the *second time this year* I was in a situation where people worried I was in some kind of suicidal crisis! And I wasn't, but others' reactions produced a crisis. I checked for Tim's response to my e-mail but never got one. I was too depressed to get much work done for my senior show.

[Monday 5/3] I found Tim before his class and he just sort of looked at me and said he got the e-mail but "didn't know what to say," because I'd sounded kind of angry. I apologized, realized I was starting to cry, and left. I *never* cry. I thought about the e-mail and realized--oh yeah, it was one of those where you say "don't think I'm angry" and then sound angry, say "I'm not blaming you" but list all the negative consequences that resulted from what they did. I felt terrible. I was at school to see the assistant dean as soon as possible, and I talked to her that afternoon--yes, I'd been self-injuring, yes, I'd *had* suicidal thoughts. I showed her the booklet--I knew it wouldn't be much fun discussing it with people who *aren't* in the art department but *are* in mental health. But the talk went well and I got a referral to the counseling department. She also took care of some of my graduation details; I had the 1000th and final run-through of my transcript with the academic advisor. When I got home that night, I sent Tim a very apologetic e-mail--after all, he *had* talked to me directly (the

I'd have to organize my stuff. (Personally, I find the suicide warning sign of "giving away possessions" amusing--if I could manage to do that it would actually *increase* my will to live.) I'd have to get in touch with nearly everyone I've ever known and liked in my whole life. (I'd want closure). All this would take *years*. And these are the things I want and need to do anyway. (People say "Live every day as if it's your last" but what if I said, "Live your life as if you're planning your exit in a few years"?)

And no one wants to hear about *this* one, but it's the truth--choosing a method takes some work. Depending on one's priorities--effective, quick, painless, non-gory. Is anything all of those? I'm so far away from doing that type of research or figuring how to actually apply it. And I'm a writer, I'd have to write a proper goodbye. (Arguably, parts of this zine already seem like one, though that's not my intent.) I suppose I have to be around a while. Make it to thirty, forty *at least*.

Let me be totally clear that I definitely don't have any romantic notions linking creativity and madness and suicide. I never had any ideas of being an artist who tragically died young--besides, I'd need to leave behind a lot more *work*, wouldn't I?

And this is probably the kind of thing a person should *never* admit, but…it doesn't seem people would be affected *enough* if something happened to me. Thinking about what I actually considered doing at the time (I'll say it again, not an actual *attempt*): who would visit me in a hospital, or even know I was there, besides my family and roommate? People from the activist collective I've worked with? Teachers? People I went to school with? Anyone I knew growing up? People I met through Mad Lib but haven't been in touch with for ages? It's just too bleak to contemplate.

It looks like my reasons for *not* making a suicide gesture are at least as depressing as my reasons *for*. I wondered, who would *hear* a "cry for help" anyway? And thought, I need to be more connected to people before I would ever do anything to sever those connections. My logic is quite peculiar.

This section is shorter than the one with my reasons *for*, I notice. I don't feel the need to give you a "14,000 things I'm happy about" list or whatever fucking cheerful blather people seem to enjoy. I do have lots of places to visit and people to contact (ones I know already, ones I don't known but admire) and recipes to follow or invent and paintings to attempt and books to read and…so on. Honestly, I'm bored writing this, or maybe it's that one's reasons to live seem *more* personal than the reasons not to, and don't need to be told anyway. I just know I still have so many things I want to contribute, things I look forward to, things I want to experience.

Telling more people, now with better results

I told my roommate the story of what happened in D.C. but without saying exactly what had set it all off. And a few days later I told him about the self-injury--I'd hid it for 6 months. I wanted to take it all slowly so I wouldn't scare *him* off, too.

My ideal scenario for telling him about my "suicidal ideation" was, I decided, at a 24-hour Huck Finn restaurant (a chain on Chicago's South Side). After some coffee, but before getting one of their amazing *half-pound* donuts. So we got there very late one night and talked, but not until we were home and leaving the car, donut in tow, did I start to blurt it out, and kept him up until 6 a.m. And he was pretty unflappable, just as he was about my self-injury. He trusted I "won't do anything stupid." Suicide would indeed be "stupid" at this point in my life, yet that remark offended me somehow.

He wasn't as cool in the following months, with my obsession with the booklets and websites and Warning Signs, when I kept saying, in the most stilted voice imaginable, inevitably cracking up before I reached the end of the phrase, "I've decided to end it all." I couldn't resist--I mean, do people actually talk the way people in booklets do? So blunt? So melodramatic? He'd wonder why it was funny to me. I'd wonder why he was bothered--after all, *The Simpsons* and *The Onion* have both had wickedly funny, tasteless jokes about suicide. But a real person joking about it is different.

the donut from the story - glazed; they have chocolate too

was supposed to make an appointment with the assistant dean of students--also a licensed therapist! Lisa talked to her; she had the clearest idea of the past and current extent of my problems and knew I wasn't in crisis. She knew I wasn't doing this to test people, that I wasn't being manipulative. But I still needed to talk to this woman, just to clear things up for the school. The irony--I'd specifically avoided mental health people at school, but would now have to see one anyway. I didn't want anyone to think I'd *ever* use artwork as a "cry for help"--but I guess showing my scars that day was one. Lisa thought that the faculty I'd shown the piece to could see it more in an art context, but younger people had been inculcated by years of after-school specials to be alarmed at things like this--maybe, but it's also true that most of these students hadn't known me long; I'd only had classes with a couple of them, semesters ago.

[Wednesday 4/28] The assistant dean would be gone until next week. I felt I couldn't proceed with the senior show until I talked to her. I was in a bad mood when I showed up to our arts group meeting that afternoon. I talked to Susan about all this, and she thought the first faculty I showed it to underreacted to my piece and should have said something. I learned Tim was the one who'd gone to the teachers with his "concern." I'd planned to e-mail him about the weird situation anyway, and I did, except I mentioned his role in it. One of those very late-night, upset e-mails.

[Thursday 4/29] Another meeting with Lisa, updating how stressful all this had become. At first I'd been strangely flattered that after years at this school I'd finally caused a little concern or controversy. But now I felt so stupid for not knowing this would happen. I felt angry but there wasn't anyone I could actually be angry at. What, I go months upset no one notices my problems, now I'm going be upset when they *do*? But it's inevitably unpleasant to think people are talking *about* you but not *to* you. I was losing confidence about my senior show installation (though I would have been nervous about this zine no matter what). I feared for the first time ever I might actually *regret* making a piece of art.

suicide and self-injury; I also said his willingness to work with difficult topics in some of his work gave me a bit of courage--and I meant it.

I expected to be hit with overwhelming panic once I truly realized I'd given *the chair of the art department of my school* a bunch of writing about *suicide* and other depressing personal topics--and right before his trip out of the country! But the panic never came, not that day, not later. Instead, it felt *liberating*. It didn't even matter if he read it or not; the simple fact that I was finishing my time at my school doing this felt like one of the bravest things I've ever done.

[Wednesday 4/21] I showed the booklet to another teacher (one I'd never had a class with) who I thought would appreciate it. I worked on the final version. I spent *four hours* with an X-Acto that day, and even found an extra blade in the graphics room, and bought a pack of blades at the art supply store--but didn't cut myself all day, though it was *so tempting*. After the artist lecture I wanted to check in with Lisa (nervous about all that horribly personal writing) but didn't feel like waiting around.

[Friday 4/23] I'd delivered color display copies of the booklet, and black and white giveaway copies, to the gallery Thursday, and now we were having our reception. I wrote a little on the back of the booklet about its personal relevance, and how I was willing to talk about this subject now but other people were uncomfortable asking me, as if I'd transferred the discomfort. I said, "This piece is an illustration of suicide as a metaphor for the difficulty of interpersonal communication." My roommate decided he didn't want his name listed as the photographer. People really liked the booklet and I didn't get any weird comments. Susan, the faculty advisor for our arts group and the teacher I'd known longest at my school, hadn't seen the piece yet but had heard about it, and liked it but just wanted to make sure I'm all right. That night, at the reception and spending time with some of the students afterward, I learned that several had dealt with suicide and/or self-injury themselves. Some had been offended by the students who'd just been amused by the piece the night I showed it. Tim wanted a color copy of the booklet; that night, I gave him some of my writing-in-progress, including parts of this.

[Tuesday 4/27] Over the weekend I noticed Lisa had sent me an e-mail on the 19th about how we could meet that week, after all. Ooops. This was the soonest we could meet, and I checked in about my projects and the gallery show, and learned she was about to put my project grade in so I could graduate. And I learned what had been happening behind the scenes the past *eleven days*. The night we selected art for the show, several students were "concerned"--more about the self-injury than the booklet. And one had told David, who had told Lee, who had told Lisa. David didn't say anything to me, and during my lengthy talk with Lee, *he* didn't bring any of this up. Lisa was designated as the one to tell me this--and to let me know I

In other news, in February I finally called my parents to tell them I hadn't graduated. Just my dad (who took it well) because my mom was watching *The Bachelorette*. And in April, I called to tell them about the self-injury (I'd sent a packet of internet material about SI first). But I didn't tell them about all *this*. They don't have to know *everything*.

A fleeting moment of guilt.

One night I meant to go to a show at the Empty Bottle, a concert benefiting a foundation for a popular local musician who'd recently been killed by a drunk driver after leaving a show at the Bottle one night. I don't think I ever met him, though odds are I'd seen him somewhere. I was exhausted that evening and didn't feel like staying up for hours in a smoky room--my usual excuses not to go out. But then I just started *crying*. Flooded with guilt--how can I go to something honoring someone (a little younger than me!) who died suddenly, a horrible accident, when I'd thought about dying on *purpose*? Choosing to die, throwing *my* life away? It's as if my thoughts of death were some sort of comment on *his* life.* I know it doesn't work that way. Suicide is a statement on one's own life and on everyone's choice to live or not live, but doesn't negate anyone else's life, does it?.

So, do you call this a happy ending?

I'm sure you want some proof of Recovery to quell your nervousness. You want to make sure I wouldn't use a project like this as an elaborate goodbye note. As *evidence*--she really *meant* it, after all! No, I'm sure it's been done before, and I'm not interested in pulling any kind of stunt, any kind of Final Project. I've got too many other projects I'm working on. And as a person writing memoirs/personal stories, not a fiction writer, I don't have the luxury of killing off my protagonist, no matter how much she annoys me or seems to deserves it at times.

But I'm not sure I'm ending this on much of an "up" note. Other than that I'm very much alive and intact (and can only hope you count that as "up"). I never sought any mental health treatment for these thoughts. I'm not interested in any pills. I don't want to spend my money on therapy right now. If I talked to therapists, they might not appreciate my pro-choice outlook on suicide, my refusal to reject it as a choice someday.

*Interestingly, weeks later, in April, I got to dance on an episode of the beloved local cable access dance/music/variety show, *Chic-A-Go-Go*, dedicated to this man.

It appears my hopelessness, self-loathing, and urges for self-destruction were much stronger than my ability to act on them. I'm not much of a drinker, mostly afraid of drugs, don't want to make myself throw up, not so great at starving myself. I doubt I'd ever self-injure seriously enough to require an emergency-room visit. But I've got to stop seeing all this as another form of failure, similar to how my artistic ideas seem to far outpace my ability to execute them.

The worst feelings are gone right now, a passing storm. I've rationally *and* emotionally rejected suicide for now. But it's still there as a jittery obsession. The reflexive message in my head went from *I wish I were dead* to *I should kill myself*--it's like flipping a switch, and it's hard to turn it back, even if I know I don't mean it.

I never quite got the feeling of relief that many claim to--that knowing they have the option of suicide, the Way Out--makes life more bearable. *If it gets bad I can always end it!* People who even keep a *method* around. That frightens me, given that I'm such a planner, an overthinker, and would need years of preparation to go.

But I will say, life is improved when you know you're *choosing* to be here.* You don't choose to be born, but as soon as you contemplate exiting, everything seems to *mean more*. My breakdown on the plane was, on reflection, one of the most spiritual moments I can ever imagine having (as an atheist, that means a lot). I might need to get closer to death to really come out *embracing* life, not merely tolerating it, but that's a theory I won't test now.

I can get pretty detached from my own emotions, very caught up in exploring suicide as artistic content, as a philosophical and political issue, and forget that some people might find this sad. Sad, or at least they're uncomfortable to hear what I was thinking.

Maybe I should feel sadder about having contemplated my violent, untimely death. Yeah, well. I should feel guiltier about using up my parents' money. I mean, I should turn the intense guilt I *do* feel into action. I should feel guiltier about barely responding to peoples' e-mail or letters or phone calls. I should spend my money on therapy instead of more books and music to clutter my apartment. I should feel stranger that I've regarded intimacy with an indifferent shrug for so long and haven't tried to pursue relationships. I should want love. I should feel weirder that running razor blades through my skin became a reasonable, unexceptional coping strategy for the things I feel. I should be more cautious about how vulnerable I could make myself by telling all this. I should care more about things. I should be "normal". I'm working on it.

*Not to imply that everyone who's considered suicide but hasn't done it yet really is *choosing* to be here. I know now that many people have decided to go but are working on finding a decent method and the nerve to use it.

I should point out that suicide is a topic I would *not* have gone anywhere near in my artwork--it's so sensitive *and* so overdone--unless pushed to by personal necessity. I wanted people to know that--but then they were a bit afraid of what the personal element may be. I wanted to have some of this work in my graduating senior fine arts show, but I was self-conscious about having *the most confessional* (and maybe even controversial) work ever in a senior show there. But it's the work that seems most important, honest, and successful to me now (well, a lot more successful than painting, which I tried mid-April, for the first time in a year or more). You don't have to be a "success" after graduating, but I do think there's a minimum, baseline expectation that you don't leave school *wanting to kill yourself*. Since I failed even *that*, why not explore how and why I went through those feelings? If other people joke about "getting out of this place alive," I mean it slightly more literally.

[Monday 4/19] Lee seemed somewhat urgent about talking to me, but I thought that was because Thursday I'd said I needed to talk to him--and he was soon to leave for a 12-day trip to Greece. I told him about the show and the booklet and the students' reactions and said it had "some personal relevance" and he looked at me quite seriously and said "Not *too* much, I hope." I talked about suicidal feelings and self-injury without being very specific. I'd wanted this talk ever since I'd left him (and Lisa and David) a letter about how my book and other artwork dealt with some ongoing personal problems and I wondered if they, as fine arts faculty, were okay with this, as compared to creative writing faculty, who I knew had to deal with student's personal issues in their work. (I've had a couple creative nonfiction classes, and heard about a *lot* of past and current crises.) Basically I didn't want them to think I was testing their limits or feel compelled to get me help. So I had this great talk with Lee, our longest one yet.

[Tuesday 4/20] And went home and stayed up *all night* writing Part I (I'd only done the beginning and ending so far). I got no sleep; I wrote and printed it out and put it in an envelope with some other writing and delivered it to him around lunchtime, in case he wanted to take it on the trip (I apologized for not including more upbeat material). I left it in Lisa's mailbox, too; we weren't meeting that week because she had to coordinate a visiting artist lecture.

I went over to the gallery to help prepare for installation (the show was very last-minute). For a while the only other student was Tim, who I'd become acquainted with recently; we'd both lived in Iowa. He seemed interested in my indie-rock namedropping (I told him I'm writing a zine about that part of my past) and turned out to be vegan. That day he said he'd been "concerned" about me. I was very touched--*no one* had been so direct with their concern. I told him I'm all right, and doing work about

The next day I told him my idea and said I'd be happy to write it--but would anyone be comfortable *reading* it? He said not to worry about that. In the next week I showed the booklet to my independent project advisor, Lisa, and my fine arts advisor, David (both former teachers of mine), and they also liked it, and didn't seem worried about me. By then, Lisa had read some of the suicide-related parts of my book's narrative. I'd been concerned about showing the booklet at school, wondering if after all those deaths at NYU, colleges were hypersensitive to any mention of suicide,* but this didn't seem to be the case. And of course after NCOR I still feared telling these things to *anyone*.

[Friday 4/16/04] I'd put the booklet aside for a while, until we planned our second show for our new student-run, off-campus gallery (I'd been too nervous about the piece to enter it in the first one). The theme was "Self-Absorbed." Perfect--suicide means getting about as absorbed into oneself as is possible (and I don't mean that as a condemnation). Our arts group spent the evening jurying entries for the show. I hadn't shown the booklet to any students yet--and now I had to show it to a dozen or so at once! But the response was great (at least, if anyone felt weird about it, they held back), and an improved version of the piece, now named *Our failure to communicate*, would be in the show. I didn't explain it much beyond "personal relevance" because I didn't want to take up everyone's time talking about my artwork if we didn't discuss anyone else's in depth. I'd have answered any questions. A few people, who said they liked it, cautioned me afterwards to be prepared for peoples' reactions and questions.

Oh, and since it was the first *hot* day of the year, 85° or so, I thought, fuck it, I'm wearing short sleeves even if there are lots of scars on my upper and lower arms and tops of my wrists. I almost said something to the first person there, but didn't want to call attention to myself. No one said anything to me that night. The scars weren't evidence of *serious* damage, but there were a lot of them and people could tell they were recent and a chronic problem.

*At a bare minimum, concerned about 1) their image if a student kills themselves 2) possible litigation 3) having as many alumni to contribute money as possible. And I'll add 4) they actually do care about me. Here's a college that's hypersensitive after mishandling one troubled student: ("Tragedy of College Student Suicide," by Darragh Worland, www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,106202,00.html) "...cites MIT as an example of a university doing a 'stellar job' of dealing proactively with campus suicide. Following the April 2000 suicide of one woman who set herself on fire in her dorm room, the university initiated a process whereby all incoming students are asked to fill out a questionnaire asking them about any history of psychological disorders, suicidal thoughts or antidepressant use." Asking about their students' *thoughts*?

It occurs to me that my story might be distinctly non-inspiring. And even "irresponsible." Where's the dramatic re-embrace of life? Where's the hope? This seems more like I sullenly threw my hands up, sarcastically remarking that committing suicide, like any major accomplishment, is *just too much work* for me right now. This isn't uplifting.

Yes, I might make people nervous when I add that even though the most desperate feelings are gone for now, suicide as a long-term possibility is *not*. What if I said that, barring any tragedy--say, an accident or sudden illness--I hope to kill myself someday? People can take it purely as a sarcastic joke. But it's not at all a cavalier attitude towards whether I live or die. It's the result of serious consideration, and I don't know how many people seriously consider this. I very much care, and if I don't have a quality life, I've got options.

Maybe these are jarring things to hear from a healthy person in her 20s, but this is *my* life. I can simultaneously have numerous things I'm looking forward to--many more than I could accomplish in a full natural lifespan, so that even ever *considering* suicide seems absurd--and also (to mix metaphors) wonder if I'm not broken beyond repair in some ways and ultimately just programmed to self-destruct someday. I don't want to be told these feelings are *wrong* or that they're *symptoms* of anything. I don't want to be cheered up and told to think "positively". I don't want anyone to feel sorry for me.

If I ever made the decision to leave--a decision I hope would be a *long* time away, when and if life had for a long time seemed a fate worse than death--honestly, the kind of "help" I'd ask for would be for the best way to do it and the courage to do it. And I'd want people to understand the decision was right for me. Not a tragic, *What could we have done?* If all this has a point, it's that *I wouldn't be a victim.*

Oh, am I making you uncomfortable? I'll admit, even I'm feeling creepy about all this. Right now I want *hope*. Right now I want to be included, valued, invited places, I want friendship, support, intimacy.* I know I can't sit around and wait for these things. I have to take an active role, the hardest step of all. Friendship, support, intimacy--that's the "help" I want right now, and the help I'd want if I'm ever seriously suicidal and know I *don't* want out yet. I don't want to ever use a suicide attempt as a cry for help. I don't want attention that way. I don't want anyone to think I'm manipulating them.

*And now that I finally am interested in dating again--um, considering that this long-term lack of intimacy is one of the reasons I felt too hopeless to be alive, wouldn't the next person I'm involved with feel the stakes are a bit too high? I have no clue how to resolve *that* one. And *Glamour* and *Cosmo* have not, as far as I know, run articles on "16 Ways to Get the Guy of Your Dreams (After You've Been So Self-Loathing You Gave Off 'I Want to Die' Vibes)."

(see bottom of next page)

I'll return to that booklet I found at school. I am so envious of *that guy*. The one who is the embodiment of a warning sign on nearly every list of suicide warning signs: the sudden lift in spirits of a depressed, suicidal person.* Because they've made a decision to do it and their problems will soon be ending.** And that's exactly what I want--except for the death. I'd love to be able to make a firm decision about something, anything. Have a purpose. Goals. Optimism. Impending relief. Happiness. I've felt like I'm just flailing along in life, rarely planning for the future because I don't feel much hope about it. I want to know how to get that feeling, and get it in a way I can live through.

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Epilogue: Another fiasco, and the bright side of suicidal despair

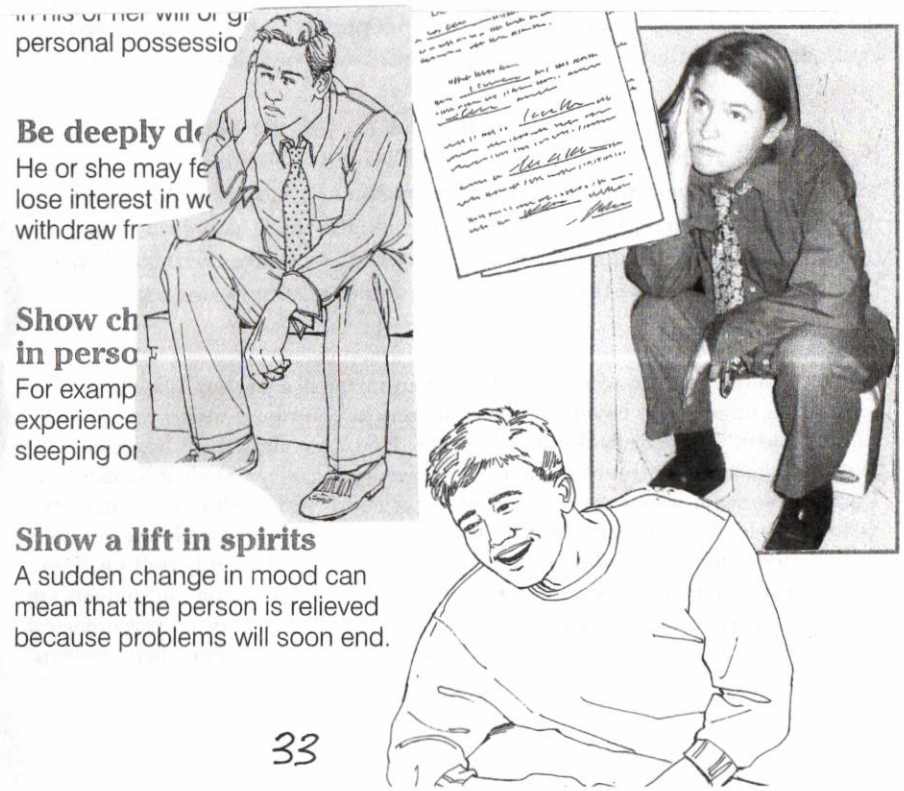
This story is long, but I think it's as relevant as telling about the actual suicidal feelings. It'll at least be interesting to artists and art students, I hope, and not just ones at my school. And it's a genuinely happy ending, if you like that sort of thing.

(You should know: First, it's a little tricky writing about a sensitive situation that took place just *days* before I published this; I waited until it seemed resolved enough. But undoubtedly some people could be uncomfortable with this; all I can say is I hope you understand why I wanted to tell all this. Since summer 2003 I've been living my life and writing a book about it at the same time; this is just one story among many. Second, *all names in this section are pseudonyms*, which I feel *extremely dorky* about, but if you're one of them, you should know I felt this was best. And at least I didn't give everyone names of characters from the NBC soap opera *Passions*--I actually considered that, fleetingly, then thought, *Wow, I'm really having an unwholesome amount of fun with this suicide zine, aren't I?*)

In mid-February, still in shock over what happened at NCOR, but with some distance and detachment from my suicidal feelings, I finally figured how to make art out of all this. I'd stared at that "Suicide--a cry for help" booklet for months, wondering how to satirize it. And I suddenly got the idea to pose as the characters and insert my pictures into the booklet.

*That guy does double-duty as "mania" in the same company's "Depression--There's hope and help" booklet.

**Obviously, none of these materials consider this a *legitimate* solution to one's problems.

I chose one character from each page--various ages, genders, and ethnicities--and put together close approximations of their outfits. One evening, my roommate directed me to imitate their poses and expressions (I couldn't manage to fake the most despondent character) and took digital photos; I printed them out the correct size and cut and pasted them into the booklet, which I finished and brought to school the following afternoon.

And didn't show to anyone for almost three weeks, and finally showed it to Lee, the art department chair--we'd recently discussed some of my digital self-portraits, and this seemed related. I said, right from the start, I didn't want anyone to take it just as a joke (which would presumably be bad taste), *or* as a literal "cry for help" on my part. I meant it to express the difficulty I'd had in talking to people--would I have had to adopt these poses and expressions for anyone to know how I'd felt? Our discussion mostly stuck to art-speak, though I did say it had some personal meaning. Lee liked it but thought it was just one joke and suggested I go farther and make a booklet with my own *written* content, and a few hours later, I thought of what eventually became what you're reading now. (I also did an educational brochure on self-injury, using myself as an example, but it seemed too intense to make public.)